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FOOD AND DRINK

We Love These Therapy Dogs at the Thunder Bay Airport

Call it a pet project: St. John Ambulance dogs provide comfort and companionship for cranky travellers

By Bonnie Schiedel | Billy in Thunder Bay

Thunder Bay International Airport's new volunteer, Murphy, is easy to spot: he sports a shaggy-hipster haircut, a sweetly mellow disposition and, it must be said, a bit of a slobber situation going on. Murphy is an eight-year-old Newfoundland dog and he "volunteers" as a St. John Ambulance therapy dog. He and his handler, Gail Bailey, are one of 10 handler-therapy dog teams that work a weekly shift at the airport, offering a soothing presence to travellers who are nervous, stressed, cranky or just looking for a little doggy distraction.

Bailey and Murphy are part of a growing trend that has seen therapy dogs (associated with various organizations) at airports across North America, and as far afield as Mumbai. "Therapy dogs just calm people down," says Bailey, who is the St. John Ambulance therapy dog program co-ordinator/evaluator for Thunder Bay and northwestern Ontario. "I remember one man laid right on the floor with Murphy for 10 minutes, cuddling and petting him. Another woman had flown in from the far north for her father's funeral, and tearfully sat down to stroke Murphy, saying 'I'm so glad I can pat him today.'"

Indeed, studies show that interacting with animals cuts levels of stress, depression and anxiety. And of course, even dog lovers in a good mood like to see a friendly pooch. In just a few minutes in Murphy's company, we see a frequent flier in a mining company ball cap who grins and says "Hi, Murphy!" en route to his flight, an airport staffer who pauses to give Murphy a scratch behind the ears, and a toddler who spies Murphy and delightedly announces, "Mama! Go see doggy now!"

Airport president Ed Schmidtke spotted a couple therapy dogs in action at a West Coast hotel and got in touch with the Thunder Bay division of St. John Ambulance to start a pilot project last summer. The initiative was a hit and has been expanded into a regular program. "The presence of therapy dogs contributes to a happy and positive vibe and we want that experience at Thunder Bay Airport," he says.

An increasingly familiar sight at schools, nursing homes and hospitals, St. John Ambulance therapy dogs have to go through a multi-step evaluation to get the job: The dog has to be well-groomed and well-trained already, with good manners (no barking, no jumping and a willingness to always be on a lead), an easy-going temperament and a love of attention, says Bailey. Then they are tested in various scenarios, such as a space with lots of wheelchairs and walkers, to see how they react, and they visit sites with an experienced handler.

After a total of 10 visits, the handler-dog team gets to work solo as well as wear a uniform – a jacket for the handler, and a vest, scarf or bib for the dog. To work around kids, the team must have completed 40 adult visits and gone through an additional evaluation. Teams have to show sensitivity, too, says Bailey: handlers smile and wait for people to come to the dog, rather than walking right up to someone who might be afraid or allergic.

If you're visiting the Thunder Bay airport and feel like making a furry acquaintance, stop by the St. John Ambulance table on main level, near the baggage claim. You may just get to meet Sarah and Guinness (a golden retriever), Jill and Flynn (a German shepherd), Jake and Verie (a standard poodle) Jan and Barack (a mixed breed) or one of the other teams. Ah, puppy love.

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