



Greg Smith SC MP

Attorney General
Minister for Justice

MEDIA RELEASE

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PRISON DOGS BRING DIGGERS' TRAUMA TO HEEL

An innovative Australian-first program using inmates to train assistance dogs is providing new hope for injured Australian diggers.

NSW Attorney General and Minister for Justice, Greg Smith SC today attended the first official graduation of the *Dogs for Diggers* program which has been developed at Bathurst Correctional Centre.

Mr Smith said the program utilised carefully selected minimum security inmates to transform ill and mistreated canines into highly trained assistance dogs, which were then handed over to injured diggers.

"This wonderful program rehabilitates inmates, unwanted or neglected dogs and traumatised returned servicemen and women," said Mr Smith.

"By caring for and training ill and mistreated animals, inmates are gaining new skills, a strong sense of responsibility and purpose that will help them better reintegrate with society on their release."

"These dogs – some saved from death row – are getting a second chance at life. Their inmate trainers transform them into healthy, fit and disciplined animals that perform a variety of tasks for their future owners."

Corrective Services NSW Commissioner Peter Severin said the dogs are placed with selected current and former Australian servicemen and women who have suffered physical and psychological injuries.

"These veterans richly deserve the help of companion dogs that will help them on the road to recovery," Mr Severin said.

"Many of the diggers receiving dogs have returned from combat service in Afghanistan and other highly dangerous locations and are suffering psychological injuries including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression."

"It's clear that the therapy dogs are responsible for a long list of benefits to the diggers while the inmates are finding new purpose and a goal for the future in training these animals for a group of people they respect."

Four dogs graduated at today's ceremony with their inmate trainers handing them over to the digger recipients. Two dogs that had already graduated from the six-month course also returned for today's ceremony with their veteran owners.

Mr Smith said the *Dogs for Diggers* program began in September 2012 in partnership with Young Diggers, a non-profit veteran welfare group that provides support to returned Australian service personnel and their families. Young Diggers refers suitable recipients to the *Dogs for Diggers* program.

"Everyone involved in the program receives significant benefits," Mr Smith said. "The dogs reduce the diggers' stress and anxiety, improve their psychological and emotional state, break down the barriers of isolation and loneliness and restore confidence."

"The inmate handlers meet the veterans at a two-day handover where the inmates teach the diggers the appropriate commands and any special needs of their new assistance dog."

"The high point of this program is the emotional handover. This is when the diggers finally receive their long-awaited canine companions and the inmates realise the huge positive impact they've made to the diggers' lives."

The Member for Bathurst Paul Toole said: "I am proud that such an innovative, Australian-first program was started in Bathurst and that it will provide a trifecta in helping veterans, inmates and unwanted dogs."

Bathurst Correctional Centre General Manager Bill Fittler, who pioneered the Australian-first program, said many people local people also supported and benefitted from Dogs for Diggers.

"The dogs and trainers also do intensive community service work with weekly visits to other partnership organisations including disabled, aged care and mental health facilities," Mr Fittler said.

"The program involves education, vocational, therapeutic and transitional programs which have been developed through evidence-based adult corrections research."

"Inmates attend TAFE and undertake a Certificate II in Animal Studies, learn skills such as resume writing, interview skills and how to develop pathways to employment."

Mr Fittler also paid special thanks to Mars Petcare Australia, a global business with a local manufacturing centre. Mars has a continuing commitment to provide free food for the dogs and has also donated \$40,000 toward the program. A total of \$15,000 of the donated funds was spent building kennels which were constructed by Bathurst inmates while the remaining \$25,000 is going towards the program's ongoing running costs.

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