



The COMFORT DOG PROJECT



*Reducing trauma through the healing power
of the human-dog bond*

OVERVIEW

The Comfort Dog Project, a program of The BIG FIX Uganda, promotes powerful dog-guardian companionship to facilitate the psycho-social rehabilitation of war survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Twenty-five years of war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government devastated Northern Uganda's families and communities. The economy of the region collapsed. Most residents lost their homes and possessions and were forced to live in camps for more than 10 years. Children were abducted and forced to carry out carnage, women and girls raped, fathers murdered. It has been estimated by mental health professionals that 7 in 10 people in Northern Uganda have been traumatically affected by the war.

Although there is now peace in Northern Uganda, internal wars are still being waged and lost. Tens of thousands of survivors--with no social and mental health support--struggle to cope with anxiety, loneliness, and despair and a host of caustic psychic and moral wounds that constitute post-traumatic stress disorder. The high rate of suicide and substance abuse in Northern Uganda is the tragic measure of the severity of PTSD in survivors and of the immediate need for effective intervention. Koro Sub County, home of The BIG FIX, has one of the highest suicide rates in the region.

The Comfort Dog Project is designed to fill this psycho-social therapeutic void by providing professional trauma counseling in conjunction with training in how to care for, teach and create a solid dog-guardian bond as a way to further reduce the symptoms of PTSD.

The program is also designed to promote the standing of dogs in Northern Uganda and to serve as a means providing lifelong quality guardianship for dogs in need of a home.

THE HEALING POWER OF THE HUMAN-DOG BOND

Thirty years of research has shown Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) improve a wide range of physiological and psychological outcomes¹. Recently, companion dog therapies have become widely used as complementary interventions to relieve the symptoms of combat-related traumatic stress. The Warrior Canine Connection is one such therapy program that is currently being offered to service members with PTSD at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Fort Belvoir, and the Menlo Park Veterans Administration Hospital. Since 2011, over 500 Warrior-trainers have experienced a reduction in their PTSD symptoms through participation in the nurturing-based training methods used to create WCC's mobility and social support service dogs. (Yount et al 2011). The success of the WCC program has lead the Department of Defense to fund research into the neurological basis of the anti-stress/prosocial benefits reported in participants of the WCC program. *The Comfort Dog Project* incorporates similar nurturing, dog training/bonding methods to build the dog-guardian bonds that can provide relief from the post traumatic effects of war in Northern Uganda.



The Comfort Dog Project provides the following therapeutic support to three groups: LRA former abductees, UPDF veterans, and war-affected community members.

TRAUMA EDUCATION & COUNSELLING:

- Educating the public about war-related post-traumatic stress disorder and depression;
- Providing one-on-one and group psychological counseling for individuals with the aim of helping them to recover from their injuries and re-integrate into the community;
- Interviewing and assessing individuals who suffer from these psychological injuries to participate in *The Comfort Dog Project*.

COMFORT DOG THERAPY:

The Dog-Guardian bonding therapeutic activities include:

- Training in dog grooming and nutrition;
- Constant companionship;
- Using praise to teach the dog to be calm and confident on leash, in public and in response to novel stimulation;
- Playing with dogs and showing affection;
- Participating in team training and public demonstrations of dog performance skills;
- Team activities with the dogs aimed at building social confidence and re-integration.

THE COMFORT DOG PROJECT

PHASES 1- 5

Phase 1 – Community Sensitization and Program Participation Recruitment (months 1-2).

We conduct community meetings, radio programs, and village outreach to educate and sensitize people about the psychological injuries of war. We explain how war trauma can cause persistent anxiety, depression, hyper-vigilance, nightmares and lead to anti-social behavior, substance abuse, and suicide. We explain how counseling, coupled with dog companionship, can help relieve psychological suffering and teach people how to cope with symptoms.

Through these activities, we identify a small group of potential clients each year (8-12 people) who are clinically suitable, and have the potential to form a strong dog-guardian bond.

Phase 2 – Client Assessments (months 3-4).

Our community psychologist interviews each client, assesses his/her symptoms, and provides a diagnosis of psychological injury. The degree of psychological injury is determined using standard diagnostic PTSD and depression measures and provides a baseline which we use to assess the therapeutic effects of participation in *The Comfort Dog Project*.

In the event it is determined that a client's needs exceed the services provided by *The Comfort Dog Project*, that client is referred to Gulu Regional Referral Hospital or to Butabika Hospital².



Phase 3 – Counseling and Development of Dog-Guardian Bonds (months 5-9).

Selected clients receive dogs rehabilitated by The BIG FIX Uganda. These dogs have been rescued from situations of neglect, mistreatment or homelessness. Selected guardians must attend and complete a month-long dog care class, prepare their homes, and demonstrate competence to provide a safe environment for a comfort dog. Placement of a dog also requires that the guardians sign commitment paperwork in a formal ceremony witnessed by local leaders to amplify the seriousness of the commitments being made. Regular home visits are made following placement of the dogs. Each new guardian is matched with a previous year program graduate who serves as a mentor and helps the new guardian train and care for his/her new dog.

All dogs participating in the project must pass temperament testing, be deemed to be friendly in demeanor and appearance, and be spayed/neutered and vaccinated. The dogs remain for life under the constant evaluation and care of our veterinary team and humane officer. Veterinary services are provided free of charge to project dogs by The BIG FIX Uganda. Food for the dogs is also routinely distributed to program participants, most of who live in extreme poverty.

During this second program phase, clients will receive services through: (a) individual one-on-one counseling with the program's psychologist, with the goal of treating the psychological injury each client presents; (b) group counseling sessions; (c) dog-guardian bonding activities; and (d) dog activities aimed at social re-integration of clients. Clients will be guided to rely on touching and talking to their dog as an integral element of the counseling.



Dog – Guardian Bonding Activities

- Instruction and regular practice in grooming exercises including: bathing, hair trimming, toenail trimming, ear cleaning, brushing, applying topical flea/tick treatments, applying topical medicines as needed, and cleaning teeth.
- Preparing and cooking nutritious food for the dogs.
- Constant presence of the dog in the guardian's daily life activities and sleeping in close proximity to the dog.
- Teaching the dog to be comfortable and calm while walking on a leash and wearing a collar and harness.
- Making leashes and other items to be used in caring for the dogs.

- Playing with the dogs, with the use of tug or fetch toys.
- Showing affection for, talking to and praising the dogs.
- Undergoing training and certification under The BIG FIX Uganda's *Gwok Ma Pire Tek* program, modeled after the AKC's Canine Good Citizen®. Achieving this certification requires that the dog demonstrate the following abilities: (1) accept a friendly stranger; (2) sit politely for petting; (3) be comfortable with grooming and examination; (4) walk well on a loose leash; (5) walk through a crowd; (6) sit and lay down upon cue; (7) come when called; (8) demonstrate politeness around other dogs; (9) be confident when there are distractions; and (10) be calm when separated from his/her guardian.

Dog Activities Aimed at Social Re-Integration

To promote personal social confidence and social integration, project participants receive team shirts and work together to accomplish shared team goals:

- Participation in group classes including topics such as pet first aid, the sentience of animals, animal rights, animal health and wellness, rabies prevention and basic veterinary medicine.
- Working as a group to educate others in the villages about these topics.
- Telling and sharing stories about the personalities and antics of the dogs.
- Working together as a group to teach dogs more advanced training exercises such as agility, the performance of tricks, goat herding demonstrations, fly ball and others. Participants will work together to create a group performance/demonstration showing what can be accomplished when dogs and people work together. The public will be invited to this performance which will be held at the conclusion of Phase 3.
- Learning and teaching the skills needed to become a foster parent for neglected and homeless dogs rescued in the future by The BIG FIX Uganda.
- Learning to become advocates through animals by practicing oral presentations.

Phase 4 – Final Assessments and Community Integration (months 10-12).

Each client is interviewed and completes standard clinical assessments of PTSD symptoms and depression. These measures are compared to the scores on the same evaluation instruments prior to participation in the *Comfort Dog* program. The participants are also asked to



provide testimonials concerning their individual experiences working with their dogs in this program.

The program goals are that participants will:

- significantly improve their psychological condition (as measured by comparison of their initial and final assessments);
- gain valuable knowledge concerning the care and keeping of dogs;
- successfully train their companion dog to help alleviate their on-going symptoms of PTSD and to maintain a supportive calm and confident demeanor under challenging circumstances;
- obtain the knowledge and skill necessary to serve as fosters for The BIG FIX Uganda, rehabilitating and helping to re-home dogs in need;
- become socially confident and capable of spreading this knowledge in their villages.

A Year End Report is prepared to summarize the work carried out and to assess the effect of dog companionship in the reduction of the symptoms of PTSD in the context of this project. As well, problems and challenges are assessed and recommendations developed for the project's future success.

Phase 5 – Service as Mentors and Ambassadors. (Ongoing)

Those clients who successfully complete the first year of the program go on to represent The BIG FIX Uganda in villages, schools, and community gatherings and advocate for animal rights, proper care of animals, and training of dogs using only positive reinforcement. The graduates also are invited to serve as mentors for new dog-guardian teams. In exchange for participation in the mentorship program and outreach work, the program graduates (called “Ambassadors”) receive compensation of 10,000 shillings per week (about \$3) which offers significant help to them in feeding themselves and their families. In exchange, The Comfort Dog Project has an exceptionally devoted team of ambassadors who carry out the mission of the organization.





HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

In August 2016, we completed the second year of The Comfort Dog Project. The End of First Year Report prepared in 2015 documented that the PTSD symptoms of those clients who participated in the project were significantly diminished. The End of Second Year Report is expected to document similar findings for the first year clients and dramatic improvement in the symptomatology of the second year clients.

After graduation in 2015, the CDP dog-guardian teams become ambassadors and mentors. Of the 9 graduates, all of them successfully filled the role of ambassadors and mentors. Unfortunately, one of the comfort dogs was murdered during the fall of 2015 so we were left with only 8 mentors for the 2016 program.

These mentors have made public appearances, participated in radio talk shows, given talks and testimonials about the importance of human-dog bonds at schools and in villages, and taught others to train dogs using only positive reinforcement. This aspect of the project has rendered dramatic results in development of confidence, happiness, and stability for the lives of the project participants.

The other impact of the program is improvement in the public's perception of dogs. When this project began in January 2015, the dog-guardian teams were ridiculed for taking dogs on walks and spending time attending dog training classes. However, the same guardians and their dogs are looked at with admiration and many people are asking to become part of the project. This interest in the comfort dogs has encouraged many other people to learn to work with their dogs on basic obedience through positive reinforcement, to wash and groom their dogs, and to walk them in public. None of these things occurred in Northern Uganda prior to the existence of this program.

THE COMFORT DOG PROJECT TEAM

Francis Okello Oloya, Community Psychologist. Mr. Okello is a graduate of Makerere University and a native of Northern Uganda. He is himself a war trauma survivor and lost his sight when a bomb exploded in his family's garden when he was 12 years old.

Sarah Schmidt, Program Coordinator for The BIG FIX Uganda, is project manager.

The BIG FIX Uganda's staff includes three veterinary doctors, two animal welfare educators, and a training program manager. All of these individuals are also involved in the administration of The Comfort dog Project's activities.

OFFICIAL ADVISOR

Human-animal bond expert, **Meg Daley Olmert** is the author of *Made For Each Other: The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond*³. Meg helped found the *Warrior Canine Connection*© program⁴ WCC and, as its

research director, will participate in WCC's ground-breaking studies over the next 3 years. She is proud to serve as official advisor of The Comfort Dog Project.



THE BIG FIX UGANDA'S MISSION AND WORK

The BIG FIX Uganda's mission is to alleviate the suffering of animals, improve the health and welfare of animals and people, and to create human-animal bonds. The BIG FIX Uganda has been working in Gulu District since August 2012 with full approval of all district officials and in cooperation with the offices of the District Veterinary Officer, District Production Coordinator and District Education Officer. Thanks to a grant from Dogs Trust, we have opened the first veterinary hospital in Northern Uganda. To date, the organization has accomplished, among other things, the following:

- Presented animal health and welfare education to 125 schools, reaching 72,126 students and teachers;
- Held 290 free veterinary field clinics in villages, during which comprehensive services were provided including surgical sterilization of dogs and cats, rabies vaccinations, parvo vaccinations, de-worming, flea/tick treatment and general surgery and veterinary care;
- Performed 3,600 free surgeries on dogs and cats and treated and vaccinated over 42,000 animals.

¹ Yount, RA, Olmert, MD, Lee, MR (2012) "Service Dog Training Program for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress in Service Members," *The U.S. Army Medical Department Journal* (April-June 2012) 63-69.

² Uganda only has one National Referral Mental Health Institution, Butabika Hospital, which is located 274 km from Gulu. Butabika is overwhelmed with patients and severely understaffed. Gulu Regional Referral Hospital provides the only publically available psychiatric services in the Gulu area. The Hospital, which serves an estimated population of 1.5 million, has only a handful of trained staff to deal with psychological injuries.

³ Olmert, MD (2009), *Made for Each Other, The biology of the Human-Animal Bond* (DaCapo Press, Cambridge, MD).

⁴ For further information: WWW.WARRIORCANINECONNECTION.ORG