Oknooshoon is a non-profit working in Armenia and realizing activities such as providing canine-assisted interventions (CAI’s) to support both dogs and youth in compromised situations and to simultaneously change the pre-existing stigma around dogs. Oknooshoon trains and certifies CAI teams (handler and therapy dog) to have them visit the persons in need and facilitate interactions or supplement existing therapeutic-interventions. The interventions will be carried out in four organizations but we hope to expand in the future once the program seems to show progress.

There is a large number of children and adolescents in Armenia that end up in institutions, permanently or temporarily, at no fault of their own due to special needs or familial challenges. Consequently, Armenia has a high volume of youth in residential and nonresidential facilities who either entered with preexisting disabilities, or are at high risk of developing mental illness because of their circumstances. Many of these institutions have limited resources even for basic care, let alone supplementary intervention methods. Thus, many institutionalized children in Armenia are receiving minimal, if any, scientifically supported interventions. This has dangerous implications for their mental health and social adjustment, and a potentially profound impact on their ability to successfully integrate into society later in life.

Within Armenia there is also a strained relationship between dogs and people. This is exacerbated by the rampant street dog population, and leads to high rates of animal cruelty. These circumstances prevent dogs and people from forming the mutually beneficial bond that is widespread and effectively leveraged in many other countries.

Oknooshoon uses canine-assisted interventions (CAIs) to help vulnerable youth and dogs in Armenia, while simultaneously improving the local human-canine bond.

We train and certify each CAI team (therapy dog and human handler pair) together and bring them to target populations. The handler facilitates activities between participants and the dog, or guides the dog to support an existing professionally-facilitated therapeutic intervention. We are launching Oknooshoon Phase 2 in the summer with a 12-week pilot at four facilities with one CAI team. We have an extensive training and certification process for our CAI teams, as well as methods and protocols for the CAI sessions to ensure safety and effectiveness. We have identified metrics to assess the social and emotional impact of our CAIs on the participants, using research methods developed with occupational therapist.

Oknooshoon’s primary mission is with using strong PR efforts in Armenia to showcase the positive human-canine interactions taking place in our program to exhibit how former street dogs can help children in need. By highlighting the positive qualities and inherent value of all dogs, including street dogs, we hope to improve the local community's perception and treatment of them, both personally and in their public policy expectations.

Oknooshoon will realize activities in four different organizations, providing therapy dog sessions to 144 participants within the frames of 96 sessions. The goal of this sessions is to help target groups to integrate into the society easily, meanwhile also strengthening human-canine bonds.

For more accurate results, Oknooshoon’s team also needs a research assistant who can study the canine-assisted team’s data and give proper assessment. The successful realization of the project, will be a core base for providing sessions in other institutions also.