ASSEMBLY, No. 3558



STATE OF NEW JERSEY

218th LEGISLATURE



INTRODUCED MARCH 12, 2018

Sponsored by:

Assemblywoman VALERIE VAINIERI HUTTLE

District 37 (Bergen)

SYNOPSIS

 Establishes pilot program in DCF providing animal-assisted therapy to victims of childhood violence, trauma, or children with behavioral health care needs; appropriates $100,000.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT

 As introduced.



An Act establishing an animal-assisted therapy pilot program and making an appropriation.

 Be It Enacted by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

 1. As used in this act:

 "Animal-assisted therapy" means a goal-directed intervention in which therapy animals are used as an integral part of the treatment process for children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs.

 "Therapy animal" means a non-task trained dog that has received training to provide support to a person who has experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; has witnessed, or is a victim of, an act of violence; or has behavioral health care needs.

 2. The Commissioner of Children and Families shall establish a three-year animal-assisted therapy pilot program to provide emotional support to children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs and are receiving services from the Divisions of Children's System of Care or Child Protection and Permanency in the Department of Children and Families. The commissioner shall establish the pilot program in the northern, central, and southern regions of the State, respectively.

 The commissioner shall solicit proposals from community-based organizations interested in participating in the pilot program. The commissioner shall review the proposals and contract with the organizations whose proposals best meet the objectives of the program. The commissioner shall give preference to organizations that provide animal-assisted therapy services at the time the proposals are solicited pursuant to this section.

 3. a. The pilot program shall be designed to improve the therapeutic outcomes of victims of childhood trauma or violence and children with behavioral healthcare needs, and promote the healing benefits of human-animal bonding by providing animal-assisted therapy services to children who meet the eligibility requirements provided in section 3 of this act.

 b. The community-based organizations that are selected by the commissioner to participate in the pilot program shall:

 (1) provide animal-assisted therapy to children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs and are receiving services from the Divisions of Children's System of Care or Child Protection and Permanency;

 (2) educate, and provide information to, health care professionals, mental health providers, Division of Child Protection and Permanency caseworkers, and behavioral health providers contracted with the Division of Children's System of Care on the healing value of therapy animals in dealing with traumatic events, including the value of the human-animal bond for children, and the benefits of animal-assisted therapy;

 (3) allow for collaboration with health care professionals, mental health providers, Division of Child Protection and Permanency caseworkers, and behavioral health providers contracted with the Division of Children's System of Care to incorporate animal-assisted therapy into the formulation of treatment modalities for, and the therapy or case plans of, children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs;

 (4) provide interactive empathetic training activities with therapy animals;

 (5) develop a coordinated volunteer canine crisis response team to provide post traumatic debriefing and counseling services during and after traumatic events to victims of childhood trauma or violence; and

 (6) establish and implement a training and certification program for the volunteer and canine members of the canine response team developed pursuant to subparagraph (5) of this subsection.

 c. The community-based organizations that are selected by the commissioner to participate in the pilot program shall possess the staff to engage in animal-assisted therapy and provide the services listed in subsection b. of this section.

 4. a. Subject to the guidelines adopted by the commissioner for the pilot program, a Division of Child Protection and Permanency caseworker, behavioral health provider contracted with the Division of Children's System of Care, school employee, health care professional, mental health provider, or health care facility may refer a child to the pilot program if the child meets all the eligibility requirements provided in subsection b. of this section.

 b. A child shall be eligible to participate in the pilot program if the child:

 (1) is between 5 and 21 years of age;

 (2) has experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; has witnessed, or is a victim of, an act of violence; or

 (3) has behavioral health care needs and is receiving services from the Divisions of Children's System of Care or Child Protection and Permanency; and

 (4) the child's parent voluntarily consents to enroll the child in the program, as appropriate.

 5. The commissioner shall apply for and accept any grant of money from the State or federal government, private foundations, or other sources, which may be available for animal-assisted therapy programs.

 6. a. The commissioner shall compile data to determine the effectiveness of the pilot program in providing animal-assisted therapy to the children who participate in the pilot program.

 b. Within one year of the expiration of this act, the commissioner shall submit a report to the Governor and, pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), to the Legislature on the effectiveness of the pilot program and make recommendations on how the program can be replicated throughout the State.

 7. There is appropriated $100,000 from the General Fund to implement the provisions of this act.

 8. This act shall take effect on the 180th day after the date of enactment and shall expire three years thereafter.

STATEMENT

 This bill establishes a three-year pilot program in the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to provide emotional support to children who: have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs and are receiving services from the Divisions of Children's System of Care (DCSOC) or Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP) in DCF.

 The Commissioner of DCF would establish the pilot program in the northern, central, and southern regions of the State, respectively, and solicit proposals from community-based organizations interested in participating in the pilot program. The bill also directs the commissioner to give preference to organizations that provide animal-assisted therapy services at the time the proposals are solicited.

 The program would be designed to improve the therapeutic outcomes of victims of childhood trauma or violence and children with behavioral healthcare needs, and promote the healing benefits of human-animal bonding by providing animal-assisted therapy to children who meet the eligibility requirements provided in the bill.

 As defined in the bill, "animal-assisted therapy" means a goal-directed intervention in which therapy animals are used as an integral part of the treatment process for children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence; or have behavioral health care needs. "Therapy animal" means a non-tasked trained dog that has received training to provide support to a person who has experienced mental, physical, emotional trauma; has witnessed, or is a victim of, an act of violence; or has behavioral health care needs.

 Under the bill's provisions, the community-based organizations selected by the commissioner to participate in the pilot program would: provide animal-assisted therapy to children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence, or have behavioral health care needs and are receiving services from DCSOC or DCPP; educate, and provide information to, health care professionals, mental health providers, DCPP caseworkers, and behavioral health providers contracted with DCSOC on the healing value of therapy animals in dealing with traumatic events, including the value of the human-animal bond for children, and the benefits of animal-assisted therapy; allow for collaboration with health care professionals, mental health providers, DCPP caseworkers, and behavioral health providers contracted with DCSOC to incorporate animal-assisted therapy into the formulation of treatment modalities for, and the therapy or case plans of, children who have experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; have witnessed, or are victims of, an act of violence, or have behavioral health care needs; provide interactive empathetic training activities with therapy animals; develop a coordinated volunteer canine crisis response team to provide post traumatic debriefing and counseling services during and after traumatic events to victims of childhood trauma or violence; establish and implement a training and certification program for the volunteer and canine members of the canine response team established pursuant to the bill; and possess the staff to engage in animal-assisted therapy and provide the services outlined in the bill.

 Subject to the guidelines adopted by the commissioner for the pilot program, a DCPP caseworker, behavioral health provider contracted with the DCSOC, school employee, health care professional, mental health provider, or health care facility may refer a child to the pilot program if the child: is between 5 and 21 years of age; has experienced mental, physical, or emotional trauma; has witnessed, or is a victim of, an act of violence; or has behavioral health care needs and is receiving services from DCSOC or DCPP; and the child's parent voluntarily consents to enroll the child in the program, as appropriate.

 The bill directs the commissioner to apply for and accept any grant of money from the State or federal government, private foundations, or other sources, which may be available for animal-assisted therapy programs.

 The bill requires the commissioner to compile data to determine the effectiveness of the pilot program in providing animal-assisted therapy to the children who participate in the pilot program, and within one year of the expiration of the bill, submit a report to the Governor and the Legislature on the effectiveness of the pilot program and make recommendations on how the program can be replicated throughout the State.

 Finally, the bill appropriates $100,000 from the general fund to DCF to implement the provisions of the bill.