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ASSISTANCE DOGS AT THE SCOUARNEC TRIAL: SUPPORT AS VALUABLE AS IT IS UNNOTICEABLE

On February 24, 2025, the trial of Joël Le Scouarnec began. He was charged with sexual assault and rape committed between 1989 and 2014 against more than 300 victims, both girls and boys, minors and adults alike. The vast majority of the assaults were documented in his notebooks, known as the “black notebooks.” This trial quickly attracted public and media attention, both due to the atrocity of the crimes committed and the scale of the proceedings. An unusual element also piqued the public’s interest: the presence of court assistance dogs. Indeed, about a dozen dogs took turns over the three months of the trial to accompany the civil parties. But who are these dogs?

Service dogs, trained by the French organization Handi’Chiens, undergo training until they are two years old¹. They are first selected at two months of age from partner breeders based on certain personality traits, such as their affinity for humans. Then, until they are 18 months old, they are placed with foster families selected by Handi’Chiens, who help with their socialization and early training. They then enter one of the association’s five training centers, where they spend six months learning about fifty commands. Upon completing their training, they are assigned to a type of assistance that matches their personality. The profile assigned to them depends on the needs of the beneficiaries they will support: assistance dogs for people with limited mobility; therapy dogs for children with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, or multiple disabilities; social support dogs for facilities such as, for example, residential care homes for the elderly (EHPAD); academic support dogs in “Localized Units for Educational Inclusion” classrooms; epilepsy assistance dogs; or even court assistance dogs.

The concept of a court assistance dog is relatively recent. In 2003, Ellen O’Neill-Stephens, then a district attorney in Seattle (United States), had to bring her son’s assistance dog, Jeeter, to court once a week for logistical reasons. She quickly noticed the positive impact Jeeter had on the plaintiffs who came to court. He was able to accompany twin sisters to the Superior Court during hearings and testimony. It was in 2004 that a Labrador was officially assigned to an American prosecutor’s office. Today, the Courthouse Dogs® Foundation², Founded by Ellen O’Neill-Stephens and Celeste Walsen, the organization is considered a pioneer in the global integration of court assistance dogs. There are currently 356 court assistance dogs working in the United States. They have also been deployed in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Belgium, France, Italy... The very first French court assistance dog is named Lol and began working in 2019 in Cahors³. He was trained directly through a collaboration

1 Cf. site de l’association HANDI’CHIENS. Chiens d’assistance HANDI’CHIENS – Éducation [online]. Available via: <https://handichiens.org/chiens-dassistance-handichiens/#education> (consulté en octobre 2025)

2 Cf. site de la Courthouse Dogs Foundation [online]. Available via: <https://courthousedogs.org/about-us/leadership/> (viewed in october 2025)

3 ALMENDROS, Frédéric. *Le chien thérapeute : moi, Lol, labrador et premier chien d’assistance judiciaire*. Éditions Favre. 2021, 136 p.

between Handi'Chiens and the Courthouse Dogs® Foundation. Since then, some thirty courtroom assistance dogs have been deployed across mainland France and its overseas territories. They can work in units for at-risk children (UAPED), police units, courthouses, and victim support organizations, for example. The enthusiasm surrounding court assistance dogs has led to the project's rapid expansion. Indeed, on February 10, 2023, the Ministry of Justice, the Handi'Chiens association, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the France Victimes Federation signed a national agreement aimed at expanding the presence of these dogs to all French departments⁴. In France, these dogs accompany victims in a variety of situations: interviews, medical-psychological evaluations, victim support sessions, and trials. Their presence during trials is therefore nothing new, but recent media coverage of trials where dogs were deployed has brought this practice to the attention of the general public. In 2022, two dogs were present at the Millas trial following a train accident involving a school bus, one accompanying the civil parties and the other accompanying the defendant⁵. During the Le Scouarnec trial, the dogs were present only with the civil parties.

Starting with the Le Scouarnec trial, this *Note* examines the potential effects of such a procedure on the civil parties. It then explores the expected benefits of having a judicial assistance dog present, before presenting feedback gathered from civil parties and professionals. It concludes with a discussion of the ethical issues raised in this context, particularly those related to animal welfare.

I) The emotional impact of the trial on the civil parties

The trial can be an emotionally challenging stage of the legal process for civil parties. It can, in fact, trigger secondary reactions to the initial trauma⁶, as well as negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness⁷.

As the Le Scouarnec trial unfolds, we can identify several factors that may affect the emotional state of the civil parties. On the one hand, they consist of the direct victims as well as their relatives, referred to as indirect victims. For most of them, this is the first time since the assault that they have faced Joël Le Scouarnec, either indirectly via video link or directly during testimony on the stand. Numerous studies suggest the importance of such a confrontation in the dynamics of trauma. It is believed to allow victims to regain control of the situation and thus counterbalance the powerlessness they felt in the past, whether during the assault or during the legal proceedings, from which victims may sometimes feel excluded⁸. However, this confrontation can dredge up traumatic memories and thus trigger negative emotions that undermine their sense of security and trust^{9,10,11}. On the other hand, during this trial, and apart from testimony given in closed session, many people have access to the testimony of the civil parties: the judges, the prosecutor, the court clerk, the attorneys, the civil parties, the defendant, law enforcement, the public, and journalists. Hearing the details of one's assault in front of strangers can intensify the secondary response to the trauma by causing a sense of powerlessness, discomfort, and potential frustration in response to the court's questions^{12,13}. The presence of professionals, such as lawyers and psychologists from the France Victimes association, provides support to civil parties when they testify in court and, more generally, throughout the trial¹⁴, but the presence of dogs seems to enhance the sense of security and mitigate the negative effects of the confrontation.

4 MINISTÈRE DE LA JUSTICE. *Le chien d'assistance judiciaire : un soutien pour les victimes* [online]. Site du ministère de la Justice, 23 august 2025. Available via: <https://www.justice.gouv.fr/actualites/actualite/chien-dassistance-judiciaire-soutien-victimes>

5 HANDI'CHIENS. *2 handi'chiens au procès de Millas* [online]. Site de l'association HANDI'CHIENS, 2 october 2022. Available via: <https://handichiens.org/2-handichiens-au-proces-de-millas/>

6 PARSONS, Jim, BERGIN, Tiffany. The impact of criminal justice involvement on victims' mental health. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 23, n° 2, 2010, p. 182-188.

7 CHANDRAKAR, Ekta. The Impact of Legal Intervention on Victims Mental Health. *NeuroQuantology*, vol. 20, n° 21, december 2022, p. 349-357.

8 FRESHWATER, Kate, AINSCOUGH, Carolyn, TOON, Kay. Confronting Abusers: The Opinions of Clinicians and Survivors. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, vol. 11, n° 4, 2002, p. 35-52.

9 PARSONS, Jim, BERGIN, Tiffany, *op. note* 6.

10 FRESHWATER, Kate, AINSCOUGH, Carolyn, TOON, Kay, *op.cit.* note 8.

11 KATIRAI, Negar. Retraumatized in Court. *Arizona Law Review*, vol. 62, n° 1, 2020, p. 81-124.

12 ARSONS, Jim, BERGIN, Tiffany, *op. cit.* note 6.

13 CHANDRAKAR, Ekti. *op.cit.* note 7.

14 *Ibid.*

II) Expected benefits of having a court assistance dog

The benefits of animal interaction on human emotional processes are relatively well documented in the literature. Being in the presence of an animal appears to improve positive mood, reduce aggression, and decrease subjective anxiety¹⁵. The presence of court assistance dogs in courtrooms and its effect on civil parties has been studied for several years. These initial studies suggest that the dogs have a beneficial impact. Researchers have shown that civil parties experience reduced stress and anxiety, that relationships between civil parties and legal professionals are improved, and that the atmosphere becomes more serene¹⁶. A research team had also observed these results when a dog was present in the courtroom waiting area. The dog helped the plaintiffs find the wait—which can be lengthy—less stressful, provided a topic of conversation unrelated to the reason for their visit to court, and several people reported feeling happy at the sight of the dog¹⁷. Thus, in court, dogs appear to serve as transitional objects designed to provide a person with psychological strength by helping them feel safe and emotionally supported¹⁸. It was for this reason that court support dogs were called in to assist during Joël Le Scouarnec's trial, to support the civil parties throughout the proceedings. The various benefits expected from the presence of these dogs include creating a reassuring environment for the civil parties, particularly by accompanying them to the witness stand—a moment when they will have to recount their assault, confront Joël Le Scouarnec, answer questions from the court, hear the reading of the “black notebooks,” and potentially view child pornography images involving them.

III) Feedback from the Le Scouarnec trial

Civil parties, legal professionals, and dog handlers (i.e., individuals trained to care for the dog, accompany it during its duties, and ensure its well-being) have shared their experiences. There is a shared enthusiasm for the beneficial role these dogs play. The dog allows civil parties to take their minds off things during proceedings, particularly during emotionally charged moments. On the stand, they are not alone and feel an extra sense of support that lightens the atmosphere during a highly stressful time. As for professionals—whether the court in the strict sense, lawyers, or members of victim advocacy groups—they also attest to the positive effect of the dog during emotionally charged periods. The more intense a trial is, due to its duration and the nature of the charges, the more this “distraction” plays an important role. Legal professionals are indeed at risk of vicarious trauma, also known as secondary trauma, which can affect all professionals exposed to violence on a daily basis¹⁹. The literature also generally notes that the benefits of having a dog present for civil parties and legal professionals are similar and relate to the same issues.

Furthermore, the inclusion of dogs in legal proceedings necessarily requires the presence of their handlers. These handlers must both care for the dog and cope with the emotional impact of the trial. Some have reported feeling extremely fatigued following such a trial. However, to date, the literature contains no studies dedicated to this dual burden on handlers. It therefore seems essential to examine this issue in order to better understand the effects of these assignments on them.

IV) Ethical Issues Regarding Animal Welfare

Despite the observed benefits, the issue of dogs' well-being and their involvement in the process is crucial. Indeed, dogs are at the heart of this support, and according to the One Welfare principle, animal well-being, human well-

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- 15 EETZ, Aandrea, UVNÄS-MOBERG, Kerstin, JULIUS, Henri, KOTRSCHAL, Kurt. Psychosocial and Psychophysiological Effects of Human-Animal Interactions : The Possible Role of Oxytocin [online]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 3, july 2012. Available via: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00234>
 - 16 ROCK, Suzanne, GATELY, Natalie. Kids, courts and canines : Evaluating the Justice Facility Dog Program through a therapeutic lens in the Perth Children's Court [online]. *Journal of Criminology*, vol. 57, n° 4, may 2024, p. 469-487. Available via: <https://doi.org/10.1177/26338076241252699>.
 - 17 SPRUIN, Elizabeth, MOZOVA, Katarina, FRANZ, Anke, *et al.* The Use of Therapy Dogs to Support Court Users in the Waiting Room. *International Criminal Justice Review*, vol. 29, n° 3, february 2019, p. 284-303.
 - 18 LITT, Carole. J. Theories of Transitional Object Attachment : An overview. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, vol. 9, n° 3, 1986, p. 383-399. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016502548600900308>
 - 19 WALSH, Diane, YAMAMOTO, Mariko, WILLITS, Neil. H., HART, Lynette A. Job-Related Stress in Forensic Interviewers of Children with Use of Therapy Dogs Compared with Facility Dogs or No Dogs [online]. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, vol. 5, march 2018. Available via: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2018.00046>

being, and the environment are interconnected²⁰. Thus, ensuring the dogs' well-being enhances the benefits they can provide to the beneficiaries.

This section is based on Camille Cagnot's direct observations of Ravel and Roucky during the first week of Joël Le Scouarnec's trial, as well as on feedback from the handlers. Throughout their presence, the dogs are accompanied by their handlers, whether in the main courtroom or in the amphitheater, which is set up to accommodate the civil parties and their attorneys. One of the first factors to consider is the number of dogs present at any given time. Each week, two dogs and their handlers are on duty, allowing for a division of the workload and the implementation of a rotation in case of fatigue. Thus, the civil parties always benefit from the presence of at least one dog without overburdening their duties.

In addition, some dogs are allowed to move about freely. This arrangement allows them to rest or to approach people on their own initiative. However, the noise level in the courtrooms is high, and the dogs' rest is likely not as effective as it would be in a quiet environment. Special attention should be paid to the length of time the dogs are present and to the possibility of removing them from the courtroom before the end of the hearing or placing them in an adjacent rest room without human interaction. A rest room is, for example, available for civil parties.

Furthermore, even these well-trained dogs may still become restless during long hearings. Consequently, breaks seem essential to ensure their optimal well-being. Hearings are punctuated by breaks, but these still require the dogs' attention, as they remain in contact with the civil parties. It has therefore proven useful for handlers to schedule staggered breaks during hearings—one dog at a time and without civil parties to accompany—to allow the dog to relieve itself, burn off energy, and explore the outdoor environment. In addition, providing enrichment toys and adhering to meal schedules, when these are fixed, also contribute to their well-being by limiting potential sources of stress. Finally, at the end of their week of service, marked fatigue was observed in some dogs, raising the question of rest periods during their assignment, or even "time off" to be scheduled following a mission that demands the dog's attention over several days. To date, no study has highlighted a negative impact of the dog, which reinforces the idea of training dogs adapted to the judicial environment, and the importance of observing and understanding the dogs' spontaneous behaviors.

These findings raise questions about how to reconcile the expectations of civil parties and professionals with the behavior and needs of the dogs in order to ensure the quality of the support provided: How should one respond when a dog is unable to work? How should the dogs' working hours be organized? How should civil parties be informed about how to interact with the dogs?

The presence of judicial assistance dogs at the Le Scouarnec trial has thus paved the way for a broader discussion, not only regarding the benefits of this program for victims and professionals, but also regarding the impact of this support on the dogs themselves. Taking this into account would help raise awareness within the judicial community of a comprehensive and ethical approach, in line with the *One Welfare* principle.

Camille CAGNOT is a COFRA doctoral student in ethology. Her dissertation is titled "Court Assistance Dogs: What Effects Do They Have on Minors, Law Enforcement Officers, and the Dogs Themselves During Hearings? An Ethological and Psychological Approach," in which she will attempt to address certain questions raised in this Note, particularly regarding animal welfare and the human-animal relationship.

Translated by Second Lieutenant Joshua JAMES

The content of this publication reflects the views of the author alone and does not necessarily reflect the views of the CRGN.

20 PINILLOS, Rebecca. G., APPLEBY, Michael. C., MANTECA, Xavier, *et al.* One Welfare – A platform for improving human and animal welfare [online]. *Veterinary Record*, vol. 179, n° 16, october 2016, p. 412-413. Available via : <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.i5470>