**“CHANCE – JPD THERAPY DOG”**

The El Paso County Juvenile Probation Department was established in 1950 with the opening of the first Juvenile Detention Facility in the State of Texas, to work with at-risk youth in the community. The Department has always been innovative and looking for ways to enhance the services provided, so the idea of a Therapy Dog for the Challenge Academy was not inconceivable. Therapy animals are known for improving social, emotional and mental functioning in youth. Detailed and developed interventions are often based on the premise that by focusing on the animal and its needs, the individual’s attention is drawn away from their own problems.

A wide range of mental health conditions are now treated with pet therapy. Interaction with animals is considered beneficial for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder, autism and other challenging psychiatric disorders. Research reflects the beneficial effects of animals on children suffering from mental illness and depression. Vulnerable children and adults have benefitted from animal therapy in numerous residential settings throughout the country; to include Massachusetts Department of Corrections, The Joseph Harp Center in Oklahoma, The Kit Carson Center in Colorado and the Assisted Living Home in Bryan College Station, Texas; to name a few.

Ms. Meryem H. Martinez of the City of El Paso Animal Services - their Animal Training & Enrichment Coordinator, met with the Juvenile Probation Department and explained the Maddie’s fund grant program, “Train a Shelter Pet Hero”. It all came together – the right program, at the right time and the right place.

Ms. Martinez was walking through the Animal Services lobby one day and noticed a man and his son with a beautiful, white Great Pyrenees dog. While petting the dog, she began to talk with the man and found out they were returning it since it had no training and had been too rough with his son. Immediately recognizing the gentle and calm disposition of this breed, Meryem knew it would be a great dog for the Juvenile Probation Department’s Challenge Academy. She began fostering and training the dog in basic commands and informed JPD that she had found the perfect fit. After training the dog, she spent the next 7 weeks at the Department introducing, training, and educating the youth on how to care for a pet.

During those 7 weeks, the Challenge Academy Cadets submitted essays on naming the dog and 2 essays were chosen that included the name “Chance”, a very appropriate name for a dog in a program designed around *second chances*.