

Vandalia 4-H LIFE club to make holiday treats for WERDCC and Mexico Animal Shelter dogs

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By Kimberly Long, staff writer
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Mexico, Mo. -

VANDALIA – A few area impounded puppies will receive some special holiday treats, thanks to a program designed to help strengthen the bonds of families with children of incarcerated parents, by teaching them the importance of generosity.

4-H LIFE members will be making homemade dog biscuits and donating them to Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center (WERDCC) dog program in Audrain County, as well as the Mexico Animal Shelter.

The activity will take place during the 4-H LIFE family club meeting, scheduled Dec. 26 at the WERDCC facility in Vandalia. This is one of many community service activities the group performs.

"Within the 4-H LIFE club meetings we see quite a bit of caring, consideration, giving, and sharing and decided we needed to do more of that for the entire community outside our own club," said youth program associate Cindy Fry with the University of Missouri Extension that oversees the 4-H LIFE program at the WERDCC facility in Vandalia.

"And since we work with the (WERDCC) dogs on a regular basis at the prison, the mothers and grandmothers incarcerated here thought it would be nice to do something for them at the holiday."

The biscuits, simple to create, are prepared in the microwave, and take about 10-20 minutes to make.

Fry said deliveries to the Mexico Animal Shelter will likely be early next week.

"I think it's quite an honor considering all the other competition in the state," said Joe Horton, supervisor of the animal control office in Mexico. "We depend on donations from the public and local merchants, so we thank WERDCC for thinking of our animals. I'm sure they're going to love them."

The Vandalia 4-H LIFE club has also decorated cards at various holidays for the Mexico Veterans' Home, thanking them for their service; performed earthworm composting projects that were later donated to science classes at their schools to show other students how to create good compost materials using kitchen scraps. The group also obtained trees from the Missouri Department of Conservation they planted to help the environment.

4-H LIFE is a family strengthening program designed to address the needs of children of incarcerated parents and their family members. 4-H LIFE provides a healthy and nurturing family environment during enhanced visits at state correction centers.

A multi-disciplinary team of University of Missouri Extension educators and their partners guide the program based on the 4-H youth development club model. The 4-H LIFE program operates at three state correctional centers in Missouri: Chillicothe Correctional Center, Chillicothe; Potosi Correctional Center, Mineral Point; and the Vandalia site.

"Research shows that offenders who have ongoing contact with their families during incarceration, and who go home to an intact family support network, are more likely to remain out of prison," said Tammy Gillespie, program coordinator for the MU Extension 4-H LIFE program. "Our goal is to reduce repeat incarceration, and to help families build and improve relationships, instead of letting the prison walls completely fracture the family."

MU Extension 4-H LIFE was recently cited as a promising parent education program in the Council of State

Government's Federal Action Plan on Children of Incarcerated Parents. The plan outlines promising practices and 70-plus recommendations for improving outcomes for the more than 1.7 million children of incarcerated parents. Supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Open Society Institute, the publication reflects the work of an advisory board of criminal justice and child welfare experts, representatives of community-based organizations, and a bipartisan group of state and local government officials.

"When parents are incarcerated, the impact on their children can be devastating," said advisory board co-chair Alan Cropsey. "There is so much we can do – from arrest to reentry – that can reduce the trauma for children and help ensure that their needs, and those of their caregivers, are being met. At last, that information is captured in this plan."

Among the federal action plan's recommendations are those that urge policymakers to:

- create federal interagency task forces that address the risk factors of children of incarcerated parents and better link them to services;
- support new policies and practices in the criminal justice system that address trauma associated with a parent's arrest and their incarceration, which is often many miles from where a child is living;
- encourage measures that facilitate visitation when in the best interests of the child and promote permanence that takes into account siblings and other important relationships;
- address federal and state measures that make it more difficult for caregivers to obtain benefits and support for these children.

"Corrections, child welfare, and other agencies that encounter children of incarcerated parents can better coordinate their efforts to provide the care and services they need," said advisory board co-chair Robin Arnold-Williams. "The Justice Center partnered with leaders in the field to ensure the action plan guides policymakers on the best strategies to ensure that these children are safe and secure.

"It is one of the most comprehensive summaries of key policy changes needed for this vulnerable population."

Fry said the feedback is, and has been, very positive, from all parties involved.

"As soon as the kids leave the club meetings for the day, the first question is, 'what are we doing next month?' They are anxious to return and do more projects," Fry said. "And their parents are just as elated, because it gives them the chance to keep their families together."

Women who graduate WERDCC's parenting skills project can move forward into the 4-H volunteer curricula, which teaches them leadership skills and how to become 4-H project leaders. Anyone interested in volunteering one Saturday each month to help with 4-H LIFE sessions can contact Fry at (573) 581-3231.

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