

## NEADS recipient of \$25,000 to outfit dogs

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**NEADS Executive Director Sheila O'Brien with service dogs Morgan (l.) and Ballau.**

Planet Dog Foundation has been named the official outfitter of National Education Assistance Dog Services by donating thousands of dollars' worth of dog wear and toys.

"We'll receive over \$25,000 in leashes, collars and dog toys over a period of time," said NEADS Executive Director Sheila O'Brien.

Planet Dog is an award-winning designer of dog products.

"We go through a lot of equipment," said O'Brien. "We place 50 dogs a year and we now have 83 puppies in our puppy program. We are increasing by leaps and bounds, mostly because of the wounded veterans that are coming home and need assistance dogs.

"To get 50 assistance dogs we run 70 dogs through our kennel," O'Brien continued. She credited Planet Dog with embracing "the important work of assistance dogs like few other companies in the pet industry. Through targeted cash grants and product donations they are making a real impact on our basic-service developing programs."

Eighty puppies in the NEADS program have been placed at correctional facilities and with foster families, and Planet Dog will outfit all of them.

"This really saves us some money," said O'Brien. "The puppies especially go through a lot, and our dogs need a variety of toys to be stimulated."

Many of the assistance dogs are Golden and Labrador retrievers that are known as soft-mouth dogs, because they gently carry items. "So the high quality Planet Dog stuffed toys are great for them to play with," she said.

Planet Dog gives each dog that graduates from the NEADS program a gift bag of toys, collars and leashes. The company also provides toys for the NEADS "puppy house" and kennel.

The Planet Dog Foundation has been supporting NEADS since 2006. Among its



**Ballau plays with a toy donated by Planet Dog. Phyllis Booth photos**

initiatives, the company has provided grants in support of the Early Learning Center and the development of a new Walker Dog Harness.

"They are very conscientious about non-profit work. They donated \$1,000 and got to name a puppy that eventually ended up going to a disabled veteran from Alaska," said O'Brien.

The Planet Dog Foundation is Planet Dog's flagship philanthropic arm whose mission is to promote and celebrate programs that enable dogs to serve people. The Foundation receives a percentage of every Planet Dog purchase, which is donated back to non-profit canine service programs nationwide such as NEADS.

In 2006, the foundation gave NEADS a \$10,000 grant to support the Canines for Combat Veterans program, which aims to restore the independence of disabled veterans, particularly those who have sustained injuries that impair their mobility.

"I never envisioned we'd have to [train] more dogs," said O'Brien. "But then, I never envisioned this war. It changes everything. We're thinking to the future. It takes two years for a puppy to become a service dog."

O'Brien recently received a call from the U.S. Army Association in Florida. "They have a 30-year-old veteran that is missing two legs and an arm and they want a service dog for him," said O'Brien. "The private sector is stepping up to the plate to help fund dogs, and build homes for homeless veterans."

In 2001, President George Bush signed a law saying the Veterans Administration could fund hearing and service dogs. The VA studied the proposal for several years and in December 2007, discontinued the funding, O'Brien said.

"I have hopes yet that the VA will approve this type of funding," she said.

Sergeant Christopher Strickland, a 22-year-old soldier wounded by a roadside bomb in Iraq in July 2006, had both his legs shattered, lost vision in one eye, and had his right arm amputated below the elbow. He received Ruthie, a yellow lab, from NEADS in August 2007. Strickland has been speaking about his experience, letting people know about NEADS and raising funds for the organization.

"When Strickland first came to us he was afraid to go into a dark room," said O'Brien. "Now he sends the dog in the room first and she turns on all the lights."

"At home with his infant son, Bradley, Strickland sends Ruthie to the refrigerator to get the baby's bottle. The dog gets the bottle and even closes the refrigerator door. "That's the difference the dog is making in his life."

O'Brien said the new population of disabled veterans is young, athletic and spirited. They do not want canes and crutches or the typical assistance devices. They would rather have service dogs."