

Benefits to the Community

It would have been impossible for anyone to anticipate the wide array of positive experiences that the Canine Companion Zones (CCZs) have generated since their inception. From the coldest weather to the hottest summer day, the dog parks have been populated with warm friendly people of all ages and backgrounds. They have become places where fast food workers and doctors, teachers and students, construction workers and attorneys find common ground. They have become zones where ethnic, racial and generational barriers dissolve. They are areas of respite for tired workers and an opportunity for seniors to stay connected. Often seniors and handicapped dog owners are unable to endure the physical strain of walking their dogs. The K9 zones provide an opportunity for a healthy and refreshing outdoor experience for these dog owners. People who have experienced personal losses come to the parks with their dogs hoping to move beyond their grief and to experience a renewed sense of connection. People who have reason to celebrate, come to share their joy and excitement with their park acquaintances! Surprisingly, these parks are a source of entertainment for non-dog owning neighbors and children who often come to sit outside the fence and watch.

Magically, the presence of canine companionship improves health, relieves stress and breaks down social fears. In his book *Optimum Health*, Dr. Stephen Sinatra reports that, "when a heart patient returns to a home where there's a pet, he or she has a 500 percent greater chance of surviving than in a home without a pet. The non judgmental affection of a pet has a truly remarkable effect. It's the greatest secret in medicine." A former heart patient in one of the local CCZs can attest to that. His wife reports that since they have owned a pet they have been motivated by their dog to take walks several times daily including a trip to the dog park. She and her husband are healthier and more connected than they have been in years since the dog brought new joy and healthy demands into their lives.

Studies have also shown that people have less stress and have lower blood pressure when they are with their dogs than when they are with any other family member or best friend. Of course when any member of the family reduces his/her stress everyone in the family benefits both physically and emotionally. Hurrah for dogs and dog parks!

A well know psychologist Randal Lookwood suggests that people in the company of dogs are more likely to be regarded as less threatening than individuals who are dogless. This has been supported in a study by British zoologist Peter Messent who found that dog walkers in public gardens and parks had a higher number of positive interactions and more extensive conversations with others than people on their own or with small children. The K9CZ is a place where it is safe to be friendly. Where else in this city do citizen strike up conversations and friendships with complete strangers? Is this not what gives community to a city? In addition studies have shown that illicit activity tends to move out of parks when canine companion zones move in.

The importance of Canine Companionship has been recognized in many cities throughout the U.S. by the addition of "dog parks" and in other ways as well. On August 28th, 1996 the Chicago White Sox held the first ever "Dog Day Event" in which over 350 dog owner and their pets sat in the bleachers for this special game.

One need not read newspapers or scientific journals to learn of these positive effects of the canine on humans, a quick trip to any dog park will make one a believer. Because the benefits of Canine Companion Zones have become so obvious, it seems vital that the programs be maintained fully and expanded into various parts of the city. Such an expansion is important not only to diminish the over-utilization of existing parks but also to bring into balance opportunities for the parts of the city that are also calling for these services.

- These parks can generate additional revenue for the Parks Department.
- Off-leash areas are more accommodating for physically disabled and senior citizens who cannot always walk with their pets.
- These parks provide opportunity for social and recreational outlets for dog owners and their pets.
- Dog parks promote responsible pet ownership and socialization for dogs.
- These have been proven in some cities to diminish undesirable, delinquent activity in city parks and to free up park police for more critical issues.

Source: "Benefits to the Community," K-9 Companion Zone, Indianapolis, Indiana www.indybarkpark.org