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Jean Brazda, director of the Victim/Witness Unit and Diversion Services for Sarpy County, with the county's first facility dog. Only after receiving the "visit" command from Brazda, his handler, is Manny allowed to go onto her lap.

Sitting (and staying) in court

Trained dog calms victims, witnesses in Sarpy County Courthouse

By KATY HEALEY

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

A teenager sits in the Sarpy County Courthouse. Soon she will be in a courtroom, testifying in a sexual assault case, and she is nervous.

Then she sees Manny the dog.

He lays his front legs across her lap, his head close enough that he could lick her chin. But Manny

resists. Instead, his eyes — deep pools of chocolate brown — glance toward her face. He looks like he could keep a secret.

Manny, a 2-year-old Labrador retriever-golden retriever mix, is a facility dog and the first of his kind on staff at the Sarpy County Courthouse. He is trained to calm victims and witnesses before they have to appear at pretrial meet-

ings or testify in court.

Manny shows the teenager another trick. Standing on all fours, he rests his head on her lap. He'll stay there until he's instructed to move, whether that's minutes or hours later. She starts to scratch his ears and, for the first time since she stepped into the courthouse, a shy smile makes its way

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Jean Brazda attended a week of training to become Manny's handler. Manny, a 2-year-old Labrador retriever-golden retriever mix, knows 38 commands.

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Manny: Retriever is Nebraska's first courthouse dog

onto her face.

"Manny can assist the truth-finding process. Really, that's what we're after," said Jean Brazda, his handler and the director of the Victim/Witness Unit and Diversion Services in Sarpy County.

Trained dogs have served in hospitals, schools and homes for decades, but courtrooms are fairly new territory. There are 67 professionally trained dogs in 25 states serving in courtrooms. Manny is the only one in Nebraska, according to the Courthouse Dogs Foundation. His first day working in Sarpy County was May 19.

The training for the dogs is extensive. Manny was bred specifically to become a facility dog. He spent 16 months in obedience and socialization training, then six months training with Canine Companions for Independence in Ohio.

Manny can turn off lights and open doors, and when Brazda says "dress," he knows

to stand still so she can put his vest on. When he wears it, he knows he's working.

He's quiet, too. Manny barks only when he's instructed, though he sometimes snores when he falls into a deep sleep. He even goes to the bathroom only when told.

He knows 38 commands in all.

To determine where the dogs will work, trainers at Canine Companions analyze their temperament. Dogs like Manny, who are calm and standouts at sit and stay commands, are best suited for the criminal justice system.

Because Manny is the first facility dog in Nebraska's court system, his presence could spark a legal test.

Sarpy County Public Defender Thomas Strigenz said, "Anything that is new, anything that changes how courtroom and investigative procedures are done, has got to be met with skepticism ... before it's really accepted."

He believes Manny will be the most helpful in pretrial interviews and meetings, but he might be distracting in the courtroom.

"We have to make sure that Manny is not disruptive, that Manny actually assists the pursuit of justice and doesn't get in the way of that," Strigenz said. "We'll see how it goes."

Manny hasn't been to court yet. Brazda said that is something he'll work up to, and then each judge will determine whether to allow Manny in his or her courtroom.

For now, Manny participates only in meetings with victims and witnesses. During those sessions, Manny might rest his head or front legs on witnesses' laps.

"Defense may see this as too much, that this could influence the jury," Brazda said.

So during trials he will lie inside the witness stand at the feet of those testifying. The dog will be hidden from view, but the jury will be made

aware there is a dog in the courtroom.

When Manny isn't working, he lives with Brazda and plays like any normal, very well-mannered dog.

Canine Companions for Independence, not the facilities that receive the dogs, covers the estimated \$50,000 cost to train each dog.

A \$10,000 grant from the Midlands Community Foundation covered Brazda's training. She attended Canine Companions' weeklong course for handlers in Ohio in May.

The grant also will cover the cost of Manny's vet visits and food. When that money is gone, Sarpy County will rely on donations, or Brazda will cover the costs. No tax dollars will pay for Manny's care.

Manny will work for eight to 10 years. He'll likely spend his retirement the same way he spends his evenings at home now: chasing a tennis ball.

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