



Mantis and Drax play on Wednesday at the new dog park at the Joplin Bungalows.

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SLEEP, PLAY, SERVE

Officials dedicate Joplin Bungalows dog park; park will help service animals stay fit to aid vets

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Happily chasing around an oversized blue ball, two young pups named Mantis and Drax on Wednesday commemorated the dog park located on the Joplin Bungalows property in west Joplin.

Minutes later — as Mantis and Drax watched with tongues lolling — nearly 50 people officially dedicated the park with speeches, a ribbon-cutting and plenty of applause.

Make no mistake about it, officials said following the ceremony — the dog park — a \$4,000 gift from the Ozark Center, an entity of Freeman Health System — was built to serve a special type of dog and its special human companion.

The 20 homes composing the Joplin Bungalows, which opened last April at 2601 S. McCoy Ave., cater to one of Joplin's most vulnerable populations: homeless veterans.

"This is a very happy moment ... and a huge benefit to the Bungalows," said Vicky Mieseler, Ozark Center's chief administrative officer. "There's not really a nice place around here for dogs to be free and to run, so the park allows them to get exercise and to be as healthy as they need to be able to do what they do" for veterans. "Dogs need to run; they can't just stay in the house forever."

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic delaying the ribbon-cutting ceremony by many months, "we hope this dog park signifies to the veterans who live here or to future veterans that we take them seriously," she said. "That we know what their needs are and we provided for that."

The relationship between humans and dogs reaches back to antiquity, when both began forming their own "packs" — first based on utility, later on mutual trust and love. The use



Audre Lentz, property manager at the Joplin Bungalows, cuts the ribbon for the new dog park on Wednesday. The housing development, which focuses on providing homes for veterans, has had the dog park on its radar since its inception, but its dedication was put off because of the pandemic.

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of emotional support and therapy animals has risen dramatically over the years, providing an important benefit to many veterans.

"A wide body of research reflects what we pet lovers already know, that animal companionship can help support positive ... physical and mental health," Mieseler said during the ceremony. "Many veterans return to the United States with serious injuries, often sustained in combat, and these veterans have discovered the support of a service dog can positively transform their lives, allowing them to live independently."

"There are no side effects from having a service dog," she continued, "and the loving bond created between the veteran



Caleb Lee plays with Drax and Mantis on Wednesday at the new dog park at the Joplin Bungalows. Operators and those who created the Joplin Bungalows have had a grip on the benefits that pets can provide.

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and the service dog can last forever.”

Trained therapy dogs, specifically linked to the needs of an individual veteran, can provide skills that go well beyond unconditional love and companionship — they can retrieve or carry objects; help a veteran transition to a prosthetic; press buttons and open doors; accompany veterans into crowded public places; provide a barrier between approaching people; can even sense increased heart rates of an approaching anxiety episode or wake a veteran from a nightmare.

In Roger Koch's case, his service dog — a standard poodle named Chief — can sense when anxiety is building inside of him, perhaps hearing his increasing heartbeat deep in the chest, and will nudge him with a wet nose to help refocus his attention elsewhere.

“We got my puppy when he was a month old and now he's going on 7 months, and he's really focused on me — he helps me deal with post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety issues,” Koch said, a 20-year military veteran who currently serves as Freeman Health System's military liaison.

Though he doesn't live at the Joplin Bungalows, he does plan on bringing Chief by for a run around the dog park in the near future.

“It gives me a chance to get out and spend time with Chief and to also interact with the other veterans (living here),” he said.

Audre Lentz, community manager for the Joplin Bungalows, said 14 veterans currently call the neighborhood home. While none of them own therapy dogs at the moment, two of them do own cats, and former resident veterans who have since moved out owned therapy dogs.

That relationship be-

tween man and dog “is just too important to ignore,” said Debbie Markman, resource development director for Joplin's Economic Security Corporation of Southwest Area. The Joplin Bungalows is a partnership between the ESC, the city of Joplin and several other entities.

It's that special relationship between veterans and service dogs, she continued, that explains why they specifically chose the housing development to be pet friendly in the first place, and why the Ozark Center ultimately chose to fund the dog park's construction on the premises.

“Since the inception of the Joplin Bungalows, it's been important for us to be pet friendly to many of our citizens who are unable to locate housing due to their best friend being a dog,” Markman said during the ceremony. “So that was one of our immediate goals of Joplin Bungalows ... to be pet friendly; not just any small dog, but any sized dog.”

It was Alan Beck, director for the Center of the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University, who became one of the first researchers more than four decades ago to observe that people relaxed when animals were nearby and that the body's blood pressure actually decreases when people directly interact with their pets — whether it's stroking a dog's head and ears, allowing a purring cat to light on one's chest in bed, or sitting and watching fish swim while listening to the soft gurgling of the tank's bubbles.

According to a 2018 Psychology Today article, “Dogs can be much more than simply a trusting buddy. The evidence proving the physical benefits of living with a canine companion has been well documented, and varies from improved cardiovascular health and increased physical activity to lower cholesterol and decreased blood pressure.”