**The Unconditional Love Program Mission Statement:**

The Unconditional Love Program provides opportunities for selected inmates to train rescued canines for obedience and possibly therapy purposes. The final objective is to place the dogs in the homes of caring individuals as a companion canine or for the purpose of advancing the training to become a therapy canine to be used within hospitals, schools, special needs centers, nursing homes, or serving as companion dogs for veterans associations. The program also teaches inmates the skills of training canines and basic care of canines. This adds value to their institutional lives and provides job skills as inmates prepare for re-entry into their communities and families.

**Programs Details:**

Founded in 2011, Alaqua’s Unconditional Love Program pairs adoptable canines with inmates for the purposes of training. The inmates learn empathy, patience and respect while teaching the dogs basic skills, thereby increasing the dogs’ chances of finding forever homes. After graduating from the program, canines are either adopted as family pets or move on for acceptance into a recognized therapy program.

Approximately ten canines participate in the program at the Walton County Work Camp with new dogs rotating every 10-12 weeks as dogs complete the program and graduate.

All of the dogs are evaluated by Alaqua staff to ensure they are good candidates for the program and once approved they enter the ten week training program. During the first two weeks, the inmates and canines utilize basic orientation skills. The remainder of the program is dedicated to training exercises with the dogs learning to sit, stand, heel and leash walk ultimately leading to program completion.

The practice of Jin Shin Jyutsu is introduced early into the program and practiced by inmates throughout the course of the program. Jin Shin Jyutsu is an ancient art that harmonizes the balance of body, mind and spirit through hands-on practice. This practice enhances the bond and results in the ability for both the inmate and canine to grow, change and ultimately experience healing and harmony.

The Unconditional Love Program coordinator works closely with the onsite staff training coordinators to monitor and track progress of canines and ensure integrity of the program.

The Unconditional Love Program ensures that the dogs that are trained have basic skills and sets standards for more involved training. The program also provides inmates a training skill while building a sense of accomplishment, empathy and patience. Similar programs report 97% of inmate handlers and sitters demonstrated greater empathy and decreased depression during incarceration; 87% demonstrated improved communication skills; and institutional staff report a decrease in disciplinary issues and improved institutional adjustment by inmates involved in canine training programs. The program demonstrates the true picture of second chances, both to the canine and to the inmate.

The incorporation of a canine training program into an institution enhances the landscape and environment of the prison, as it takes the involvement of not only the inmate population, but the full support of the correctional staff and administration.

Inmates are selected for the program based on a history of institutional adjustment and willingness to participate in the program components. Inmates with histories of repeated violence, crimes against animals or sexual related offenses are not allowed to participate. Canines are trained and cared for by a designated trainer along with a caretaker who assists with the day-to-day care of the canine.

**Benefits to the Community:**

Dogs have long held the title of “man’s best friend” for their ability to provide companionship, comfort and support. This friendship and love is unconditional, with no judgments or expectations of anything other than love in return.

Studies have shown that interacting with dogs benefits humans in a variety of ways, to include:

* Decreased heart rate and blood pressure;
* Increased positive mood levels;
* Reduced loneliness; and
* In senior citizens, increased mental stimulation and social interaction.

**Benefits to Canines:**

Many of Alaqua’s canines come from situations where they were neglected, abused, or abandoned. Like their human counterparts, they may find it difficult to form relationships and establish trust. The psychological damage causes them to shy away from humans, which in turn makes them less likely to be adopted.

In the Unconditional Love Program, they learn to interact with both humans and other canines in a structured setting. People often adopt dogs expecting them to know or easily learn basic commands. Unfortunately, when this expectation is not met, many abandon these faithful companions to a shelter where they can linger for months, years or more likely are euthanized.

The inmates and the canines participating in the Unconditional Love Program often have similar histories of abandonment, abuse or neglect. The training program and Jin Shin Jyutsu components teach both inmate and canine the skills and behaviors for success. The Unconditional Love Program relies on donations, grants and scholarships to expand, enrich, and promote.

**Locations:**

***Walton Correctional Institution Work Camp, DeFuniak Springs, FL***

The Unconditional Love Program expanded to Walton County in 2014 to the Walton Correctional Facility Work Camp. Walton Work Camp houses men sentenced to the Florida Department of Corrections, 67 of whom volunteer as trainers and caretakers.

The Walton Correctional Institution Work Camp Team:

* Rhonda Pabst, Program Coordinator / Sergeant
* Pridgen, Major
* John W. Whitehurst, Warden

**Donations and Sponsorships:**

The Unconditional Love Program relies on donations, scholarships and sponsorships.

You can donate to the Unconditional Love Program by sending a check to Alaqua Animal Refuge, donating through our web site at [www.alaqua.org/how-to-help/donate-now/](http://www.alaqua.org/how-to-help/donate-now/) or by simply calling the Refuge and making a donation over the phone.

Should you or your group like to sponsor one of the Canine / Inmate teams for a 10 – 12 week session; a $500.00 sponsorship fee entitles you to:

* A photo of your canine with his inmate team
* Updates throughout the session from Alaqua Staff, Inmates, Trainers and Prison Staff
* An invitation for two to graduation. *(Special arrangements can be made for larger groups)*
* A graduation photo of you with your canine and their inmate team
* Your sponsorship information can be listed with your canine on our social media pages

This level of sponsorship will feed your canine throughout the session, provide for heartworm preventative, medical care, treats and the actual training costs for the period