

## After years of quietly supporting victims, Stilson the dog is retiring

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Stilson, a 9-year-old black lab, looks up at his boss, Snohomish County prosecutor Mark Roe, before being honored by the County Council on Monday in Everett for his years of service in providing comfort to crime victims. Stilson's handler, victim-witness advocate Heidi Potter (in red), is leaving the county prosecutor's office and Stilson is going with her.



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Potter (right) shares a laugh with Snohomish County prosecutor Mark Roe.



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Heidi Potter (in red) and Stilson pose for a photo with prosecutor Mark Roe and members of the Snohomish County Council.



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Stilson, a 9-year-old black lab, waits inside the Snohomish County Council chambers Monday morning before receiving an honor for his years of service providing comfort to victims of crime.



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Heidi Potter and Stilson stand to be recognized for Stilson's years of service providing comfort to victims of crime by the Snohomish County Council Monday morning in Everett. Councilman Dave Somers' terrier mix, Hewitt, also was on hand for the occasion.



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Stilson waits inside council chambers.

By [Diana Hefley](#), Herald Writer

EVERETT -- Last fall an 11-year-old girl sat in a Snohomish County courtroom recounting how she repeatedly was whipped with electrical cords, burned with lit cigarettes and starved for days.

It took the child [two hours](#) to detail all the abuse she suffered at the hands of the Mukilteo woman who was supposed to care for her.

The girl was not alone up on the witness stand. She had a friend.

Stilson, a gentle 80-pound black Labrador, was lying at her feet. For two hours Stilson held command, not moving or making a sound. He didn't even stir when the defense attorney accidentally knocked over a cup of water on the witness stand.

Stilson had a job to do. He was there to offer the brave girl some comfort, to remind her that she wasn't alone and to reassure her that she was safe.

"I love that dog. I love what he has done for kids and victims. He helps them face what they have to face in the criminal justice system," said Snohomish County deputy prosecutor Lisa Paul, who secured a [conviction](#) in the abuse case. "With that girl I know that Stilson was so important to her. He was like a life ring, something she could hold on to."

In 2006, Stilson became the [first service dog](#) used by the Snohomish County Prosecutor's Office. He was the second in the nation to be employed by prosecutors. King County had the first courthouse dog, serving crime victims and witnesses.

Stilson is retiring Friday. His handler and owner, Heidi Potter, the lead victim-witness advocate, is leaving the prosecutor's office for other opportunities. They are moving to California. Stilson likely is going to become a beach bum, spending his days playing in the ocean and people watching along the California coast.

"He's burned out. He's almost 9 years old and he's worked with hundreds of children. He's had hundreds of kids crying on him and climbing on him," Potter said. "It's time for him just to be a dog. It's time for him not to always be on his best behavior."

Stilson came to work at the courthouse after then-prosecuting attorney Janice Ellis had her friend, [Ellen O'Neill-Stephens](#), a King County deputy prosecutor, give a presentation about a service dog being used in Seattle.

Ellis remembers Potter staying behind, telling her boss she was interested in getting paired up with a service dog. She agreed to undergo the training and have a dog live with her full time. She'd pay for his food and medical bills.

"That was fundamental. If we were going to do it, we needed someone in the office to volunteer," said Ellis, who is now a Snohomish County Superior Court judge.

Potter applied to be matched with a dog provided by [Canine Companions for Independence](#), a private nonprofit group that breeds and trains dogs mainly for people with disabilities.

Volunteer puppy trainers receive the dogs when they're a couple of months old. For about a year the volunteers teach the dogs basic obedience and expose them to social settings, such as malls and restaurants. Then the dogs are sent to a facility for extensive, professional training. The dogs usually are

about 2 when they are matched with a handler.

Stilson first was trained to be with a person with physical disabilities, but he once broke command to go buddy up to a smaller dog. Trainers decided he was better suited for the job at the prosecutor's office.

The trainers saw that Stilson was the kind of dog that wanted to love on people, Potter said. He was willing to receive their stress and let it go, she said.

Stilson helped Potter build rapport with people in tense and stressful situations. Often times the people Potter met through her work had been through a tragedy. Stilson helped her break the ice and connect with people. And Stilson often was the only comfort children victims had as they were asked to talk about physical and sexual abuse.

He'd nuzzle up to them on the couch. They'd pet him and giggle over his cool tricks. Some children talked directly to Stilson about the abuse.

Potter remembers that his first six months of being in interviews with children Stilson would come home dog-tired. He'd eat dinner and sleep the rest of the night. He absorbed the grief and hurt, Potter said.

Prosecuting attorney Mark Roe was skeptical in the beginning about having a dog work with victims.

"I thought our circus was enough of a zoo already without adding animals," he said.

Then he saw Stilson interact with child victims. The dog changed the prosecutor's mind.

"Stilson is the least we can do for those kids," Roe said.

The easygoing lab was so good at his job that people were convinced that Dawson Place also should use a service dog to help child victims. The child advocacy center provides medical and counseling services to young crime victims and their families. The center also houses detectives and prosecutors who investigate crimes against children. A dainty blonde Labrador named [Harper](#) works out of Dawson Place these days.

The prosecutor's office is planning to get another dog as soon as one becomes available and the handler can be trained with the dog, Potter said.

"It has worked beautifully. Heidi has a lovely demeanor and good nature. Stilson has an equally lovely demeanor," Ellis said. "(Potter's) initiative was very much appreciated. It was a huge gift to the office and the work of the office."

Stilson also has been a faithful pal to Potter's co-workers. He often made his rounds in the morning, soaking in the love. Potter said there often was a steady stream of visitors to her office. Mostly, people were there to see Stilson, who often was dozing in the corner, waiting for his next job.

Potter expects Stilson will do a lot more napping and playing, but mostly napping, once he's retired.

"He deserves to just be a dog for the last few years of his life," she said.

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