



### **Mission**

A Fair Shake for Youth, Inc., is a social and emotional learning program that harnesses the therapeutic power of dogs to help underserved and vulnerable New York City youth develop greater empathy and self-esteem, reduce bullying and build the skills and behaviors that foster positive interactions with family, peers and the community.

### **Background**

Increasingly, dogs are being used to help hospital patients, nursing home residents, children learning to read, and veterans suffering from PTSD. Across the country prisoners are training shelter dogs and service dogs and in the process building the empathy, self-esteem and skills and behaviors that will be critical for their successful reentry into the community.

33% of New York City children grow up in poverty. In many instances children face not only poverty, but also related factors such as abuse, neglect, inadequate healthcare, poor schools and housing, a parent in prison. Faced with these challenges, they may miss the developmental experiences that form the foundation of empathy--unconditional love, having one's physical and emotional needs met, and feeling safe. But dogs, honest and non-judgmental, are often uniquely able to connect with young people, offering a safe environment and catalyst for learning and personal growth.

Audrey Hendler, founder and executive director of A Fair Shake for Youth, transitioned her career from corporate marketing and consulting to be an instructor for Puppies Behind Bars. Witnessing inmates transform their lives through the profound power of dogs, Audrey founded A Fair Shake for Youth on the belief that bringing the power of dogs to bear early would help young people build a foundation that would help give them a fair shake at a better life.

### **Program**

Since 2010 A Fair Shake has partnered with over 50 schools and community organizations that serve low-income neighborhoods or vulnerable populations. Partnerships have included public schools in the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens as well as Henry Street Settlement, Children's Aid Society, Horizon Juvenile (Detention) Center, and a domestic violence shelter in East Harlem.

Once a week for 10 weeks, 12 middle school aged youth have the opportunity to work with 3 therapy dog teams under the direction of a Fair Shake instructor. Each session combines hands-on work with the dogs and a topic from our dog-related curriculum. As the kids practice commands and teach tricks, they learn about communication, see the power of positive reinforcement, and build relationships based on trust and respect with the dogs and each other.

Young people learn about shelters, rescue, and breed discrimination, topics that often resonate with their own life experiences. Other activities may include interviewing dog owners at a local park about their relationship with their dog, *virtually* adopting shelter dogs, or listening as a veteran suffering from PTSD talks about how his dog helps him take risks to get his life back.

Through the sessions young people get the chance to see and understand dogs as vulnerable, sentient beings, perhaps more like themselves than they realize. They see dogs that got a second chance and dared to trust again; they develop patience and tolerance. They see that they can impact those around them and be heard.