

# Clinton Township students give Stiggy program a boost



Erie Elementary School Student Lighthouse Team members presented a check to Stiggy's Dogs in November. Photo courtesy of DONNA FOURNIER

By Nicole Tuttle, For The Macomb Daily

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In November, Erie Elementary School students awarded a check to Stiggy's Dogs, an organization designed to rescue and train shelter dogs to become service dogs for military veterans. Photo courtesy of GERARD EVANSKI

Providing two second chances instead of one was the goal of a recent Erie Elementary School fundraiser.

Students, led by the Clinton Township school's Student Lighthouse Team, recently collected more than \$600 for Stiggy's Dogs, a non-profit organization that provides military veterans who have Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) with Psychiatric Service Dogs (PSDs). The dogs are primarily rescued from shelters for training.

Teacher Patty Messenger said the Student Lighthouse Team (SLT) connects the school to students, staff and community through activities and events based on Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Successful Learners.

"There are currently 15 students from grades one to five on our 2015 SLT with their term ending on Dec. 31, 2015," Messenger said. "The outgoing SLT will help transition our incoming 2016 SLT. The 2016 SLT has 20 members from grades K to five."

Messenger stated her teaching colleague and fellow Lighthouse Team sponsor Mary Beth Hill first learned about Stiggy's Dogs two summers ago through a WDIV (Channel 4) television program.

"In the fall of 2014, the students unanimously chose Stiggy's Dogs as our community service project for Veteran's Day," Messenger said. "Since then they have chosen to continue it as an Erie tradition to support our veterans at our annual Veteran's Day celebration. Over a two year span we have raised over \$1,500 for this worthwhile organization."

Students presented a check to Stiggy's Dogs on Nov. 20. Donna Fournier, the director of training for Stiggy's Dogs, said the money could assist in paying an adoption fee or obtain a starter kit for a dog, including dishes, a leash, a collar, treats and food.

"Everything a veteran needs to get a dog into their home without having to rush out and buy a bunch of stuff," Fournier said.

Stiggy's Dogs has a training center in Brighton and is based in Howell. Seventeen total dogs were trained this year through the organization, with eight of this number still in training, according to Fournier. Many veterans are currently on a waiting list to obtain dogs from the organization, she added.

"We just started a prison training program. We work with a corrections facility in Lapeer. Currently five dogs are in basic obedience with prisoners. Now those five will come out of prison training with Canine Good Citizen evaluations done," Fournier said.

After this training, veterans are paired with dogs so that the dogs can be trained to meet the individual's needs, according to Fournier. The dogs are trained to interact with the public and to help the veterans with individual needs such as waking them from night terrors, turning on lights, providing a safe space in public, reacting to a specific emotional state or serving as a reminder to take medication, according to Fournier.

According to Stiggy's Dogs website, dogs are provided free of charge to military veterans.

"They have to be honorably discharged with no convictions of animal abuse or a violent history towards animals, and be able to come to classes weekly..." Fournier said.

Other requirements include being drug free or sober for a year with sponsorship, providing personal references and having a commitment level as well as having their PTSD or TBI directly related to service overseas.

The dogs are considered service dogs under the Americans with Disabilities Act as amended and can enter most public places with their handlers, according to the website.

Fournier said veterans who already have a dog of their own before seeking help from the organization can have this dog trained, so long as the dog meets the specific criteria, health and behavior evaluation tests.

According to Stiggy's Dogs website, the organization was founded by Jennifer Petre to continue the life work and compassion for animals of her nephew HM3 Benjamin "Doc Stiggy" Castiglione, who died while caring for Marines as a Navy Corpsman in Afghanistan in September 2009.

To learn more, apply for a dog or donate, visit [stiggysdogs.org](http://stiggysdogs.org).