

Community Spotlight: Palmetto Animal Assisted Life Services (PAALS)

Throughout Columbia, Lexington and the Midlands, you can find a wide range of organizations that are dedicated to making a difference in people's lives. To bring attention to the important work of these organizations, The Jeffcoat Firm launched our "Community Spotlight" series. In this series, we highlight local groups that are making a difference in our communities. We hope that you enjoy reading about these unique and innovative organizations and become inspired to support their efforts.

PAALS: Enriching and Empowering the Lives of Adults and Children

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[Palmetto Animal Assisted Life Services \(PAALS\)](#) is a non-profit organization that enriches and empowers children and adults with physical disabilities and special needs throughout South Carolina by training service dogs to pair with them and by providing a variety of educational and recreational programs. PAALS is the state's only Assistance Dog International (ADI) accredited organization. It is also a founding member of Animal Assisted Interventions International (AAII).

PAALS started in 2007. For many years, it operated out of the home of its executive director. However, thanks to donations and the work of tireless volunteers, the organization moved into a new training and kenneling facility in August 2015. Despite a setback caused by a black water flood, PAALS was able to celebrate its Grand Opening in April 2016. Efforts are now underway to add an outdoor classroom space to the facility.

Training and Pairing Service Dogs

Like guide dogs for the blind and visually impaired and hearing dogs for the deaf and hard of hearing, service dogs are a type of assistance dog. PAALS focuses on training and pairing five specific types of [service dogs](#):

- **Mobility service dogs** – These dogs assist people with physical disabilities that require use of a cane, walker, wheelchair or similar assistive device. The dogs perform tasks that range from opening doors to turning on lights.
- **Autism service dogs** – These dogs help adults and children with autism when they go out in public. For instance, the dog may provide comfort by lying on the person's lap or pressing against the person's leg.
- **PTSD service dogs** – These dogs assist individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by helping to reduce their fear and anxiety and serving as a physical barrier between the person and others.
- **Facility dogs** – These dogs can play a key role in educational and therapeutic activities. They are often paired with teachers, counselors, social workers, nurses and ministers.
- **Home skilled companions** – These dogs are trained to assist their partners in only home settings. They can build a loving bond with their partners and play a role in therapy and in the development of life skills.

It can take two years for PAALS to train puppies to become service dogs. The training can cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$30,000 for each dog, and it can involve hundreds of hours of work. PAALS charges clients only the cost of a two-week team training class, which is around \$5,000. The organization helps individuals to raise funds to cover the amount and provides scholarships to those in need. Additionally, Rob's Best Friend Fund covers tuition for veterans and first responders. PAALS does not turn anyone away due to financial reasons.

Educational and Recreational Activities

As part of the training process, PAALS provides many opportunities for people throughout South Carolina to interact with their dogs. These programs play a role in the training and help to educate others about caring for dogs and about the valuable role that service dogs play in people's lives. A few examples are:

- **After School PAALS** – This [after-school program](#) allows students to work with professional dog trainers at the PAALS training facility. Students can enroll for one-month, two-month or full-semester sessions.
- **Summer PAALS** – Children can learn dog care, training and community service at these annual camps. Every summer, PAALS holds two week-long camps at its training facility, and it holds another week session at the [Big Red Barn Retreat](#) farm in Blythewood. Those sessions are open to children ages 11-14 and children with disabilities between the ages of 11 and 19. PAALS also offers a Pups camp for children ages 8-10.
- **Reading PAALS** – This program is held twice a month at different locations. It allows children to practice their reading skills by reading to a "non-judgmental" service dog. The program serves as a fun, confidence-boosting way to motivate kids to read.
- **Prison PAALS** – In this program, state prison inmates learn how to raise and train service dogs for people with disabilities. PAALS is now a certified member of the Department of Justice Apprenticeship Program.
- **PAALS Patriots** – PAALS has teamed up with the Big Red Barn Retreat, Pathways Growth and Learning Center and Veterans Administration to hold this therapy program for veterans and active-duty service members who suffer from combat-related anxiety.
- **School PAALS** – This is a multi-faceted program that involves working with students from elementary school through college, including at the University of South Carolina.

How Can You Help PAALS?

PAALS receives no government or insurance funding. So, it relies entirely on donors and volunteers of all kinds. If you would like to support PAALS and its mission, you can find many different ways to become involved. Just a few of those ways are:

- **Financial donations** – PAALS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit. So, all [donations](#) are tax deductible. You can choose from several different options, including serving as a sponsor or partner. Monthly donations, tribute donations and donations directly to the Rob's Best Friend Fund for veterans and first responders are also available. The South Carolina Secretary of State has named PAALS as one of 10 "Angel Charities" based on the organization's responsible and ethical use of donations. You can also donate as part of events such as the annual [UN-Gala](#) (set for September 21, 2019, with a Bill Murray theme) and Midlands Gives Day (set for May 7, 2019).
- **Item donations** – Check out the PAALS website to see [wish lists](#) of different items that you can donate such as dog food, toys and cleaning supplies.
- **Volunteering** – You can also donate your time as a [volunteer](#) with PAALS. See the website to learn more about how you can work with the organization, including becoming trained to be a part of the Weekend Foster PAALS program.

If you would like to learn more, check out the [PAALS monthly newsletter](#) or its regularly updated [Facebook](#) page.