



Winter 2-16-2021

## Furlong On How 'First Dogs' De-Stress The White House

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### Recommended Citation

Vollmer, Dana, "Furlong On How 'First Dogs' De-Stress The White House" (2021).

*Interviews for WGLT*. 83.

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Ellen Furlong, February 16, 2021

Charlie Schlenker: The White House has two new four legged occupants: Champ and Major - Biden - and the German shepherds offer special benefits to workers in the White House. Illinois Wesleyan University psychology professor Ellen Furlong says that newly-mented first dogs will help president Biden and his staff navigate the stresses and tensions of the current political landscape. Dana Vollmer talks with Furlong about the long legacy of pets in the oval office and how they make the workplace better.

Ellen Furlong: There've been way more presidents who have pets than who don't. Many of these presidents have owned dogs... but we've also seen a variety of other kinds of creatures in the White House. You know, some presidents had snakes and you know Teddy Roosevelt supposedly had a bear at some point (laughs) so there've been all kinds of pets in the White House. Recently, you know, we have had Bo and Sunny Obama. We've had Miss Beazley and Barney Bush. Socks, we can't forget socks Clinton and (laughs) Buddy Clinton (laughs) uhm so we can't forget the cats either. So there is a long history of pets in the White House and it's the exception rather than the rule to not have pets.

Dana Vollmer: These pets aren't just good for being a cute story and a photo-op. They actually have really tangible benefits for not just the first family but others in the White House it sounds like. Can you tell me about that?

Furlong: yeah so there's a growing body of research looking at the effect of pets on productivity and well-being of people working in offices and other kinds of workplaces that show just enormous benefits of having pets around where people might be stressed out or making big important decisions, like in the White House, you can see things like greater worker satisfaction. So people who work at places where there are pets around tend to have greater career satisfaction, better working conditions, better quality of life at work... You can also see dramatic effects of pets on stress... and this is something that has been studied for many, many years and there has been all kinds of anecdotal reports of people saying "oh I go home after a long day of work and I'm so tired and stressed out and I see that little wagging tail and I feel so much better!" (laughs) But there is actually now a big body of research that supports that claim. You can see that being around pets leads to reduced or slower heart rates; you can see reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol for example. You can see blood pressure decreases. So there are some very physical benefits to having pets around.

Vollmer: You touched on the human connection that they promote, as well, and I think you referred to it as social lubricant (laughs) can you explain that a little bit?

Furlong: (laughs) yeah definitely. So, it can be hard sometimes to start conversations with new people or you know, if you know there's going to be a tough conversation coming up; it can be hard to start that conversation and sometimes dogs can help a conversation get started. When dogs are around, people smile at each other more often. They reported a better sense of community, they have more long conversations, and they are more likely to form long term

friendships. The dogs won't even have to do anything; they just have to be there (laughs). They can have these sorts of social lubricating benefits. You know, people in neighborhoods where there are more dogs report a better sense of community among their neighborhood. They have better social interactions with their neighbors so when a dog is present people tend to interact with each other more than when a dog is not present.

Vollmer: And what are some other contexts that we see pets in the workplace? What are some other companies that are utilizing this?

Furlong: yeah, there's a ton. So, Amazon does. I believe Apple does, um Zigna, there is a long list online of pet-friendly companies that would allow you to bring your pets in. Of course, it's not the best idea for every workplace to have pets. You might not want a pet in a restaurant for example (laughs). But, there are cases where, you know, people have allergies or are afraid of pets so they are not going to be beneficial in every single workplace. But those where they aren't such an issue. Pets can really bring support to a work environment.

Vollmer: and you argue that the White House might be an even bigger example of that because of the important work that happens there. How would it be especially beneficial on the hill?

Furlong: Yeah... so we know that when people are stressed out they make worse decisions. They have more trouble solving problems and with all of the benefits of pets reducing stress levels; you can see cases where when pets are around, people do make better decisions and they do solve problems better. So, you give people a complicated math problem to solve, they are more likely to be able to solve it well, correctly, and quickly with a pet around. So you can imagine that pets in the oval office might help reduce stress, might provide some of that social lubricant that can get people on both sides of the aisle talking to each other. It can sort of promote that social cohesion that you really might want in a place where people with different perspectives and different goals really need to be working together.

Schlenker: That's Illinois Wesleyan University psychology professor Ellen Furlong speaking with Dana Vollmer. Find the full story at [wgl.org](http://wgl.org).