

Therapy K9 Program Proposal

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Overview

The following proposal provides a look into some of the research, benefits and experiences of having a therapy dog program, and an outline for the implementation of one in a law enforcement setting. The use of therapy dogs in law enforcement is a relatively new concept. There were only six Therapy K9s nationwide in 2017, and their use has been slowly gaining traction. Therapy dogs in a law enforcement setting are a valuable tool when responding to events where victims and witnesses of trauma and mental health crises are present. They provide many benefits for departments both internally and externally, and can help build community relations and engagement. Studies have shown the biological effects therapy dogs have on an individual, and while there are not many studies specifically in law enforcement settings, the few that exist along with personal testimonies are abundant in positive outcomes. Therapy dogs are easy to acquire and train, especially compared to other K9 units. Their benefits and accessibility make them a must have for departments.

Studies

There has been plenty of research on the benefits of therapy dogs and how they affect people on a biological level—providing mental and physical benefits—and how they may reduce stress and symptoms of mental illness. It has been reported that humans interacting with animals have found that petting them promoted the release of serotonin, prolactin, and oxytocin—all hormones that play a role in elevating mood (Animal-Assisted). They tend to lower anxiety and blood pressure, as well as increase mental stimulation, which can help with recall (Animal-Assisted). They also reduce cortisol

levels and physiological stress markers in healthy adults and children as well as in physically impaired adults and autistic children (Lass-Hennemann).

Another study, titled Psychiatric Assistance Dog Use for People Living with Mental Health Disorders, looked into participants with mental health diagnoses who used psychiatric assistance dogs (PAD). Diagnoses included depression, anxiety, PTSD, and panic attacks. “PAD usage decreased (46%), increased (30%) or did not change (24%) participants' use of psychiatric or other health care services. Decrease in service use was mainly due to reduced suicide attempts, and less requirement for hospitalization and medication; increased use was mainly due to enhanced ability to attend appointments” (Lloyd).

While the use and effectiveness of therapy dogs have been researched greatly, there are only a handful of studies done specifically on their use in law enforcement. Of that handful, there is only one peer reviewed dissertation on running therapy dogs in policing. Many of the effects of a therapy dog translate directly into their use in law enforcement. Rather than providing aid for an individual patient, therapy dogs would be used widely to lower stress and anxiety following traumatic events such as accidents or cases of abuse. In the aforementioned dissertation, research on using therapy dogs during investigations of child abuse are working towards establishing standard procedures for their use. It concluded that “the introduction of therapy dogs during law enforcement investigations had a statistical significance in the reduction of anxiety and increased disclosure rates with child victims, without interfering with judicial policies and procedures” (Holton).

While comparing cases of children from 2 to 12 years old, there was a 36% disclosure rate prior to the therapy dog program, and after disclosure rates increased to 82%.

In order to discuss how therapy dogs may bridge the gap in relations between the public and police, it is important to first examine that gap. In nationwide surveys regarding public perceptions of police, societal expectations and hopes for the future are outlined. It was noted that American's confidence in police has decreased, with declines in views of doing acceptable work on protecting against crime, using the right amount of force, treating racial and ethnic groups equally, and holding officers accountable for misconduct (Public Perceptions). It was also reported that residents in fragile communities want police to spend the same or more time in their communities, and that there seems to be a craving for positive relations with police in communities (Public Perceptions). Therapy dogs can help to improve these relations, as will be discussed in the next section.

Benefits and Uses

I. Internal

Therapy dogs can assist with stress management for employees within the department.

They can help improve the overall mental health and resiliency of officers and dispatchers, and help them to combat compassion fatigue (Wickham). Oftentimes stigmas against officers and mental health prevent them from seeking help, and instead may resort to other 'stress relievers' such as alcohol. Something as simple as petting a therapy dog, or playing fetch, allows for stress relief. In some instances, officers may not even realize the stress built up, and having a therapy dog in office can help with releasing everyday

pressures of the job. Some departments have begun to allow personal dogs in the office for dispatchers, provided they are well-mannered.

II. External

Therapy dogs are versatile and can assist their handlers in a variety of settings. They can be used to comfort both victims and witnesses following a traumatic event by reducing anxiety. In instances of a mental health crisis or a cognitive disability, a therapy dog can help an individual calm down, or provide a path for communication. In the event of a suicide victim, a therapy dog can provide comfort without forcing verbal communication.

A therapy dog can assist with investigations and interviews. Interacting with the dog increases mental stimulation, which can help with recall (Animal-Assisted). Oftentimes trauma or discomfort inhibits communication, therapy dogs can help comfort victims to make information gathering easier. They can lead to apprehensions through creating communication, if a victim is able to provide information, the officers may then act on it. Therapy dogs have also been able to assist in interrogations by lowering tension and providing an outlet for suspects to confess to, or by providing relief once a confession has been made.

A therapy dog provides another tool for de-escalation. While one would not be deployed during a high-intensity interaction, they can be used as an incentive for someone to calm down. Knowing that there is a dog they can interact with can oftentimes cause individuals to control themselves faster than an officer simply trying to talk them down.

Stigmas and negativity in the media create a divide between law enforcement and the public. In many cases, officers are seen as unapproachable. Schultz's study has found that the perception of police as violent is so easily believed due to an individual's socioeconomic background as well as the hard stances news media takes against police when there are issues of misconduct (31). A therapy dog can help to bridge this gap between officers and the community. In an effort to build community relations, a therapy dog program brings a positive light that focuses on victims and making people feel more comfortable around police. Positive policing using a therapy dog diverts individual and community focus on getting the assistance they need rather than the potential consequences. It helps to make positive associations with police interactions, further building a trusting relationship. A Therapy K9 team can make many community appearances, attending community events to simply engage with the community is a great way to build positive relations. The happy demeanor of a therapy dog can procure a lot of attention, especially with children.

Other settings that may allow a Therapy K9 include schools and children services, prosecutor's office and court hearings, recovery meetings and even prisons. A bill passed in New Hampshire that allows "facility" dogs in court for victims or witnesses under 18 or with intellectual disabilities or for sexual offenses (Wickham). These situations can be very intimidating, the presence of a therapy dog can help to lower anxiety so that progress may be made in proceedings. There are also a few programs that allow inmates to help raise therapy dogs. They work with the officers in raising and training the dog for service (Jacobs). This is not just beneficial for the department in receiving aid for raising a therapy dog, it also helps inmates get through their sentence.

III. Duties and Deployment

A Therapy K9 acts as a secondary responder, its safety, the safety of others, and circumstances of the situation must be considered before deployment. The handler must be able to determine if deployment of a Therapy K9 would be beneficial or detrimental in a situation. Factors such as a fear of dogs or allergies may actually escalate a situation, and proper judgment must be made.

Uses for a Therapy K9 team include:

Child abuse investigations, forensic interviews or trial testimony for victim or witnesses, criminal investigations and interviews, mental health support and stress management in critical incidents, school support, community outreach and engagement, traumatic incidents, crisis intervention, natural disaster incidents, medical facility visits, staff wellness, any other situations deemed appropriate.

Experiences

Courtesy of an interview with Officer Cohen and K9 Duke of Williston PD as well as other reports, the following are a short list of experiences from the Therapy K9 team:

After a shooting at the local mall, a child was experiencing symptoms of PTSD and was having nightmares. K9 Duke helped to provide comfort while the child was processing and the nightmares have since ceased.

During an arrest of a woman who was driving under the influence, her kids were present in the backseat. While their mother was being taken into custody, K9 Duke preoccupied

the kids. When interviewed later by DCF, the kids only remembered playing with Duke, and not the trauma of their mother being arrested (Murray).

When attempting to interview a woman in a domestic violence case, she began to suffer from a PTSD episode. She completely shut down and was unable to communicate. K9 Duke sat with her, applying pressure therapy, and slowly she began to return to the present. In a matter of minutes, she was petting Duke and smiling.

While visiting schools, there are occasionally children who are afraid of dogs. K9 Duke will lay in place while children are allowed to pet him. Those who are apprehensive see others interacting with Duke, and soon find themselves petting him. These positive interactions help children overcome fears while also learning about law enforcement and having positive experiences with police.

K9 Duke sat next to a suspect believed to have a mental illness during an interview. Throughout the interview he was ignored. After confessing to committing the crime, it was reported that he dropped to the floor to hug Duke and receive comfort (Murray).

K9 Duke comforted witnesses and individuals providing aid to a drowning victim. He provided them comfort after receiving CPR and administration of an AED (*Comfort*).

K9 Duke provided comfort to a suicide victim until transportation to ER (*Comfort*).

Costs

Traditional K9 teams can cost a department anywhere from \$20-40k. Therapy dogs are inexpensive, and only cost a few thousand. Costs are for the dog itself, training and

classes, supplies, and routine vet appointments. Many of these costs may be lowered through donations of funding and services. Veterinarians, trainers, breeders, and other agencies and community partners may be more than willing to make contributions to law enforcement.

For Williston's Therapy K9 team, costs in 2021 without fundraisers were \$2,487, which included equipment, medical expenses, adding a heat alert system, training and classes. Since initiation in 2020, the team has raised over \$22,000, with expenses only reaching \$10,000 (*Comfort*). They have received many donations, including Duke himself from Boonefield Labradors, as well as free training sessions from Thin Blue Line K9, food from several agencies, and puppy exams and medications, along with continued discounts from Mountain View Animal Hospital.

Requirements

I. Handler

The chosen handler for a Therapy K9 team must have an inherent calmness and sense of empathy. They must have excellent communication and have high levels of determination, time management and consistency. They must be able to understand emotional stress, be able to comfort and work with victims and witnesses of crimes, and be able to communicate with people suffering from mental health crises. The handler must understand that they will likely be exposed to additional trauma, and should be able to manage their own mental health, seeking treatment if necessary. The handler must be

able to dedicate time to raise and train a therapy dog, and be able to support and house the dog for the duration of its life or time with the handler.

II. Dog

The Therapy K9 is to be chosen solely on temperament. Considerations such as breed and size may be considered, but it is ultimately the dog's temperament and willingness to work that will determine its suitability. If breeds are being considered, recognizable breeds mean the public may already be comfortable with them. These may include retrievers and poodles. Some hypoallergenic breeds may also be considered. Some breeds may have stigmas that provide obstacles for the program such as bully breeds (Staffordshire Terriers and other breeds or mixes) as well as shepherds who may have a negative association with police. Dogs may be acquired through a breeder, whether purchased or donated, they may be a preexisting family dog, or rescued from a shelter. Preexisting K9 Units in the department may be trained for therapy work with exceptions. Patrol dogs who have a potential to bite are not suitable for therapy dogs. Detection and tracking dogs may be suitable as they are not trained for biting, and are frequently out in public. There may be some negative associations with detection dogs though, as people may not want to interact with them for fear of an alert. Regardless of how the dog is acquired, it must have an appropriate temperament. A dog that is too hyperactive, fear aggressive, aggressive or anxious is not suitable. A dog that is confident, willing to please, and can demonstrate control and calmness makes a great candidate.

III. Training

Once acquired, training must begin day one, regardless of the age of the dog. They must be adept at basic obedience. There are many avenues for a dog to receive certifications. The Alliance of Therapy Dogs (ATD) is an international registry for therapy dog teams that can provide testing, certifications and registration. The International Association of Canine Professionals (IACP) can provide certifications for dog trainers and handlers, and they may also receive a CTP-C (Certified Trauma Practitioner-Clinical) designation which endorses an understanding of the impacts of trauma. Franklin County Sheriff's Office (Columbus, OH) offers a police therapy dog training course which introduces therapy dogs to environments that would be typical in a law enforcement setting, but not in an average therapy dog course. It provides exposure to loud sounds, guns, and even helicopters to create a well-rounded therapy dog that may be deployed in any situation.

IV. Care and Supplies

The general care and maintenance of the therapy dog is the responsibility of the handler. Oftentimes supplies and services may be donated or discounted. Food, grooming, veterinarian care, insurance, and other supplies are required to ensure the overall health and wellbeing of the dog are met. Depending on department policy, liability insurance may be required. However, for some therapy dogs may be excluded as their tasks differ from other traditional K9 units. A uniform is required for the therapy dog that clearly labels its therapy dog status and police association.

V. Funding

A Therapy K9 team already has an advantage in that their costs are significantly lower than traditional K9 Units. Costs can be lowered further by collecting donations and fundraising. Non-profit organizations, local businesses and organizations, and individual donors may offer financial assistance or donation of goods and services. A dedicated bank account may be created for collecting, spending, and overseeing a Therapy K9 team's funding.

Conclusion

Though the use of therapy dogs in law enforcement is still being studied, the current examples offer many positives for their use. Their benefits to police departments are numerous. They offer aid for the mental health of officers, comfort victims of violent or traumatic crimes and accidents, provide another tool for de-escalation, lower anxiety, promote communication and help build community relations. Being relatively low-cost compared to other K9 Units a department may utilize, they are a very affordable and accessible tool that all departments should have. This proposal is intended to help departments realize a Therapy K9's ability to intervene and help treat human harm, and briefly outline what is necessary to starting a Therapy K9 Program. Currently, the deployment of a Therapy K9 is not always seen as an option when responding to incidents. Raising awareness, creating more programs, and demonstrating further success will help to make the use of Therapy K9s second nature.

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