

The Impact of Dogs on Resilience:

Facility and Therapy Dog Programs to Enhance Officer Wellness

K9 Glory & Detective Theresa Mahon - NYPD

Relationship Between Dogs and Resilience

The capacity to prepare for and recover from stress and adversity is essential for law enforcement personnel. Among the various strategies available to help agencies enhance officer resilience are those that embrace the presence of dogs. Wellness programs featuring dogs can offer practical, affordable, and effective approaches to promoting officer well-being.

Why Dogs?

Interactions with dogs have been shown to lower an individual's heart rate and blood pressure levels.¹ Studies also show that interactions between humans and dogs help alleviate Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms.^{2,3} By serving as a distraction or relief from symptoms, dogs can help individuals cope with depression and other mental health conditions.⁴ When recovering from trauma, regular, structured interactions with dogs have been found to reduce participants' self-reported fear, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance.⁵ In other words, dogs help reduce anxiety by providing immediate calm and offering support without judgment.⁶



Leo and Wellness Coordinator Jeremy Mallory from Capitol Police

Versatility of Wellness Dogs

Agencies can incorporate dogs, whether it be a single dog or a team of dogs, into new or existing wellness programs. In addition to one-on-one interaction with members of the agency, dogs may also attend funerals, memorials, and critical incident debriefs.

Different classifications of dogs are trained for unique functions, and although parts of the training may be similar, it is important to understand the distinctions. The following definitions, by Canine Companions, illustrate the different roles undertaken by dogs.⁷ Typically, law enforcement agencies use facility or therapy dogs in conjunction with their wellness programs.

- A **Facility Dog** has been trained in specific tasks to assist professionals in a facility, such as police departments, courthouses, schools, counseling centers, and hospitals. These dogs are trained to work with multiple people who need social interaction, recovery motivation, comfort, or a feeling of safety. They are allowed in the facility they were trained to assist but are not free to visit public areas where dogs are prohibited.
- A **Therapy Dog** has been certified through the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen Test to visit and provide comfort and joy to people who need it. They should not be taken to public places where dogs are not allowed.
- A **Service Dog** has been trained to perform work or tasks to assist a single individual with disabilities. This role requires the most amount of training as compared to other types. These dogs go through extensive training and are socialized to be well-behaved in a variety of social settings. Service dogs are allowed to follow their owner into any area where members of the public are free to visit, even if dogs aren't typically allowed, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act.⁸

- An **Emotional Support Dog** helps people with disabling mental health conditions feel comfortable and calm. They are not trained in specific tasks and do not have the right to go into public areas where dogs are not allowed. With proper verification, emotional support dogs may be allowed in housing that does not typically permit pets, so they can assist their owners.

It is important to note that wellness dogs are distinct from police K-9s. They serve different roles and will require different training and handlers.

Other programs and services that can benefit from the incorporation of dogs are:

- **Chaplain Program:** The Roanoke (VA) Police Department works with a non-profit chaplaincy program that received funding for a dog to assist first responders.⁹
- **Critical Incident Stress Management Program:** The New York (NY) Police Department has dogs available to comfort officers after critical incidents. They find that the dogs immediately relieve officers' stress.¹⁰
- **Victim Services:** The Miami Beach (FL) Police Department assigns Victim Advocates as dog handlers. When a child needs to be interviewed, as a victim or witness, the dog can meet and comfort the child before or after the forensic interview.¹¹
- **Community Outreach Programs:** The Groton (CT) Police Department uses dogs for community events such as Coffee with a Cop, car shows, charity 5Ks, D.A.R.E. classes, and Special Olympics Law Enforcement Torch Run.¹² Having the dog at these events initiates positive interactions and builds relationships with community members.



Building Wellness Programs with Dogs

Planning and Goal Setting

Researching, planning, and goal setting can help determine how the agency will benefit by including dogs, and, if so, how to set the program up for success.

STEP 1

Assess the agency's wellness program and associated goals.

Assess current initiatives and consider the following:

- Mission statements that define the purpose and value of the programs.
- Alignment of programs with the agency's organizational structure.
- Current goals and priorities and how they relate to the agency's needs.

Examine what services are needed and how a wellness dog might help add value. Once these needs are identified, define a goal to help guide the program's development. For example:

The therapy dog program will support agency members to increase officers' skills and practice of self-care and to reduce the stigma of seeking assistance for mental health through regular interaction with trained therapy dogs.

The [*IACP's Officer Health and Wellness: Agency Assessment Tool and Action Planning Roadmap*](#) can assist in the assessment.



STEP 2

Select what role the dog will take and establish policies and standard operating procedures outlining plans for the dog's care and responsibilities.

Staffing and Scheduling

Dogs require consistency. Whoever handles the dogs is responsible for feeding, grooming, and exercising them on a regular schedule. Some agencies have multiple staff members working with the dogs to accommodate the 24/7 nature of law enforcement. If multiple handlers will be responsible for the dog, it is imperative that all handlers work with and train the dog in the same manner.

This is for safety and liability concerns. Other agencies have one person consistently care for the dog and take the dog home after their shift to allow rest.

Staff members who become handlers should go through training with regular refresher courses. When considering candidates for dog handlers, consider the following:

- Familiarity with departmental policies, procedures, and code of conduct
- Inherent calmness and empathy
- Experience in peer support
- Consistent and reliable work performance

Agencies should set aside time for the dog to rest, exercise, be active, and play. Handlers should be mindful not to overwork dogs, especially when the dogs may be used for multiple roles such as officer wellness and community engagement. Different dog training and certification programs have different recommendations for the frequency of breaks the dogs need during the working day. The average recommendation is that the dog should have a break from work every two to three hours. Ensure this is considered when creating policies about therapy/facility dog visits. Another factor is building in time throughout the day for the dog's bathroom breaks, typically three to five times per day.

When planning the dogs' working hours, the staff responsible for the dogs should be communicative with the agency personnel. Some people are not comfortable with dogs or may have allergies. It is important to be considerate of these concerns and train dog handlers to be aware of body language that may indicate an individual is uncomfortable with the dog.



Fergus - Douglas County Sheriff's

Dog Selection

In addition to selecting a role for the dog, agencies should consider the available dog breeds, as some may be a better fit than others. The limitations of the agency's facilities will have an impact on the breed of dog chosen. Different breeds of dogs may require different levels of exercise and, therefore, require more space. If personnel have allergies, the agency may consider a hypoallergenic breed. While therapy dogs should be selected based on temperament and ability, the dog's appearance may be a consideration, as the community may have associations with or perceptions of certain breeds based on historical context.

According to the U.S. Service Animals Organization, the following breeds are typically well-suited for therapy or facility roles:¹³

- Golden Retriever
- Poodle **
- Newfoundland
- Border Collie
- Cavalier King Charles Spaniel
- Bichon Frise
- Yorkshire Terrier **
- Corgi
- Labrador Retriever
- Papillon
- Pug



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***These dogs are hypoallergenic*

Therapy or facility dog organizations or breeders may have additional recommendations to help select the best fit for your agency.

Budget Implications

Therapy or facility dogs can have a high impact on officer wellness and resilience, but there are costs to consider before implementing a program.¹⁴ Some breeders or training programs work with law enforcement agencies to provide dogs at low to no cost. Some options to explore include:

- Freedom Service Dogs of America
- Puppies Behind Bars
- Mutts With a Mission
- Service Dogs for America
- Paw and Stripes College

When acquiring a dog, each training program will have different application processes and requirements. Some or all of the following may need to be provided:

- Professional accreditation certifications (CALEA, LEA, etc.)
- Professional references from those who the dog will be living with
- Letter of approval from leadership
- Current photo of the facility
- Application fee
- Application packet (questions about the facility and programs)

After the agency receives a dog and the required training, the agency will be responsible for:



Administrators can work to either allocate their budget for these expenses or receive donations from their community. However, it is recommended that agencies do not rely solely on community donations. Some agencies have worked with nonprofit organizations or partners to pay for different fees or bills that occur.¹⁵

Dog Training

There are a variety of organizations that train dogs to be therapy or facility dogs. Agencies should review the program's credentials with the American Kennel Club (AKC) or other similar organizations. Dogs should successfully complete their annual or bi-annual test to ensure they are fit for duty and meet their credential requirements from AKC or Canine Companions.

Policy and Liability

Policies and standard operating procedures (SOP) should be established detailing the deployment of the dog program. The agency may choose to create a new policy or incorporate the therapy or facility dog considerations into an existing policy, such as peer support, employee mental health, or a general K-9 policy (while ensuring a distinction between K-9s and wellness dogs). If the agency already has dogs in any capacity, it may be possible to mirror existing policies or SOPs. At a minimum, policies and SOPs should address the following:

■ Dog Deployment

This policy should detail when and how the dog will be deployed and include details for processes and procedures for transporting and caring for the dog, as well as details and limitations on specific functions for the dog.

This policy should outline all types of situations in which the dog may be deployed and any differences between those situations. Examples include:

- ◆ Wellness visits
- ◆ Critical incident debriefs or patrol room visits
- ◆ Law enforcement family events

■ Handler Qualifications

This policy should detail the selection standards to become a handler and what handlers need to do to maintain that status.

■ Caretaking Responsibilities

This policy should outline the responsibilities of those on the handler team for providing care and rest breaks for the dogs.

■ Program Liability

This policy should include detailed procedures for if a dog bites, scratches, jumps on, or otherwise injures agency personnel or a member of the community.

This policy should address liability coverage for potential bodily injuries caused by the dog, such as that available through the agency's insurance provider.

STEP 3

Continued evaluation of the program

Just as it is important to assess the need for a program in the beginning, new and existing programs should have a regular schedule of program evaluation. Employing observation reports, focus groups, surveys and interviews can keep the program on track, highlight what is working, and identify where there is room for improvement.

Additional Resources:

[IACP Officer Safety and Wellness](#)



[BJA VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Initiative](#)



Arthur US Border Patrol



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- 9 Emma Coleman, "Roanoke Nonprofit Law Enforcement Chaplaincy Gets First Service Dog," *The Roanoke Times*, November 10, 2022, https://roanoke.com/news/local/crime-courts/roanoke-nonprofit-law-enforcement-chaplaincy-gets-first-service-dog/article_65b56766-5ed8-11ed-9eae-cb27dde777a8.html#:~:text=Scarlett%2C%20a%202-year-old%20yellow%20Labrador%2C%20became%20the%20first,County%20with%20a%20variety%20of%20stress%20relieving%20supports.
- 10 Kenneth M. Quick and Eric L. Piza, "Police Officers' Best Friend?: An Exploratory Analysis of the Effect of Service Dogs on Perceived Organizational Support in Policing," *The Police Journal* 95, no. 1 (2021): 127-151, doi: 10.1177/0032258X211044711.
- 11 Noel Castillo, "Understanding and Applying Wellness in Your Police Department while Dealing with Today's Challenges" (virtual presentation, IACP 2021 Officer Safety and Wellness Symposium, March 17-19, 2021).
- 12 Kenneth M. Quick and Eric L. Piza, "Police Officers' Best Friend?: An Exploratory Analysis of the Effect of Service Dogs on Perceived Organizational Support in Policing," *The Police Journal* 95, no. 1 (2021): 127-151, doi: 10.1177/0032258X211044711.
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