

## Handling Police Canine Medical Emergencies

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Police canines play an increasingly important role in both day-to-day law enforcement and homeland security. As more canine teams are deployed throughout the United States, the number of traumas, illnesses, and injuries they sustain also increases. Police service dogs (PSDs) are seriously injured or killed in the line of duty on almost a weekly basis. Although no one expects his or her partner to become a statistic, chances are good that *your* partner will become sick or injured during his career. There's an old saying, "Prior planning prevents poor performance"; nowhere is that saying more apt than in dealing with PSD medical emergencies. In fact, a lot of the work of dealing with such emergencies can and should be done before they occur. Following are ideas and practices to maximize your PSD's chances of survival and recovery from a medical emergency.

### Put It in Writing

*Rule one: The more you write down, the less you'll have to remember. The less you have to remember, the less you are likely to forget.*

Every working team should establish a written protocol that spells out what to do in case of a canine emergency. Creating the protocol requires handlers to think about and plan for various situations before they happen. Prior planning is important for several reasons. In many cases of canine injury, such as in a vehicle accident, the handler also is incapacitated and may not be able to direct or articulate the plan that he or she developed. Even if the handler is not physically incapacitated, the high level of stress associated with a canine emergency combined with the strong bond between handler and canine may prevent the handler from thinking and acting clearly and logically.

An emergency response protocol should contain contact information for and directions to the canine's primary veterinarian, as well as any back-up hospitals that could be used. Why list more than one clinic? Many veterinary hospitals do not provide twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week access, but instead have emergency clinics that provide care for after-hours and weekend emergencies. Even if your veterinarian does provide services 24/7, your partner may become injured while the vet is on vacation.

Other considerations include geography and traffic. If your routine patrol area is large and your vet is at one corner of your zone, you may not have time to transport your PSD the long distance if an emergency occurs at the opposite end of your patrol area. In urban environments, traffic congestion can slow your progress in a certain direction, even when using lights and sirens, so traveling in the opposite direction may be faster.

Print first-aid information in an easy-to-understand, easy-to-use format so that anyone attempting to assist can do so efficiently. Keep a copy of your protocol inside the K-9 First-Aid Kit in your patrol vehicle and place other copies in the dispatch area and with the law-enforcement supervisors and emergency personnel who work with you. The more people "in the know," the better.

Ideally, a handler should introduce the PSD to the personnel in veterinary hospitals, ambulance corps, and so on who may get involved in an emergency. That gives medical professionals the opportunity to meet the PSD in a nonstressful situation and to ask the handler questions that are important for providing proper assistance. It also desensitizes the PSD to new

people and environments such as ambulances, firemen in turn-out coats, and helicopters. An introductory session is a great opportunity to dispel any myths or fears people may have about your PSD. People are more comfortable with and thus more likely to assist an animal they know than one that is anonymous. As most handlers know, a program's success or failure often lies in the public's perception; in this case, your partner's life or death may depend on someone's ability and willingness to help out.

### **Know Basic First Aid**

*Rule two: Your partner is willing to give his life for yours; it is your responsibility to care for him as well.*

The next step in preparedness is to take an animal-oriented first-aid course. Unfortunately, in the United States, few such courses exist and even fewer deal exclusively with service animals. Take the time to research the courses in your area and make sure that qualified personnel who have appropriate experience and training teach them. It is vitally important that canine handlers become familiar with basic first-aid and emergency treatment of their canine partners. Failure to do so constitutes negligence. In many circumstances, the outcome of an emergency is determined by the care that is provided *before* the victim arrives at the hospital. Appropriate care during the first few minutes of a trauma can mean the difference between life and death. Although this aspect of training may not be as exciting as detector or patrol work, it is equally important.

### **Be Well Equipped**

*Rule three: It's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.*

The first-aid kit is a vital piece of equipment that goes hand in hand with first-aid training. Canine handlers should have a kit that is specifically designed and used only for the service dog. All necessary medical supplies should be in the kit rather than in various locations such as the trunk or glove compartment.

Clearly identify and label the Police K-9 First-Aid Kit. If your partner becomes injured while away from your vehicle, your primary responsibility is to remain with him to provide a calming influence and attend to his needs. Therefore, you may need to ask someone else to retrieve the first-aid kit. That person may not be a fellow law-enforcement officer, firefighter, or member of an ambulance crew but, rather, a civilian who happens to be present at the right place at the right time. A civilian is not likely to have crisis management training and may be eager to help but inept at rendering assistance. To make it easier for such a person to help you and your partner, give clear, concise directions, such as "Go to the blue police car marked Police K-9 and in the trunk on the left you will find a blue bag labeled Police K-9 First-Aid Kit. Please bring that kit to me quickly." If the kit is blatantly easy to identify, your helper won't come running back after five minutes of searching only to bring you a toolbox.

In addition to basic first-aid items, stock your kit with specialty items or products your partner may need, such as Narcan for drug dogs, extra booties for search and rescue dogs, or Benadryl for dogs who have allergies.

### **Don't Wait Until It's Too Late**

Police canine medical emergencies are stressful situations in which your partner's life or death may literally be in your hands. Planning and preparation go a long way to ensuring the best possible care and best possible outcome in any emergency that you and your partner may face.

**This article was reprinted with permission from *Police K-9 Magazine*, Summer 2005.**

**[box] First-Aid Kit**

Your canine first-aid kit should contain the following:

- Instant ice packs
- Dosing syringe
- Blanket
- Thermal blanket
- Irrigation solution
- Large and small Band-Aids
- Nonadherent pads (Telfa)
- Thermometer
- 4 × 4-inch bandages
- Various bandages
- Self-clinging wrap (Elasticon/Vetrap)
- Betadine swabs
- Splinting material (Fiberglas or plaster of paris)
- Hydrogen peroxide
- Heavy-duty bandage scissors
- Small and large towels
- Extra collar and leash
- Pliers
- Plastic bags
- Rope
- Muzzle
- Rubbing alcohol
- Cast padding
- Kling
- Penlight
- Q-tips
- Various types of tape
- Stethoscope
- Pertinent patient information
- Hemostats
- Sterile gloves
- Tongue depressors
- Suture material
- Large-gauge needles
- Forceps/tweezers
- Water-soluble lubricant
- Scalpel blades
- Basic canine first-aid manual