**Law Enforcement Canine – Going Away or Staying? - It is Up to Us**

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 *“Never Forget”*

 

I was asked to write a short article on where I thought law enforcement canine units are headed in today’s “defund the police” world. I am not a professional writer but I hope to speak the language of common sense. This article will hopefully benefit handlers, supervisors, trainers, and maybe even the senior leadership of the Department. There is a lot more to be discussed than I can possibly put in this one article but here is the short answer:

**Canine *can* survive in the future, but not as we know it today.**

First, let me tell you a little bit about my background so that you might better understand where I am coming from. In 1990, I successfully interviewed/tested for a position in canine and have had the good fortune to have had five loyal canine partners in the 30 years that followed until my retirement this year. Somehow, I managed to stay in the Unit for most of my career as a Police Officer, Sergeant, Lieutenant and eventually as Commanding Officer of the 50 canine teams that were deployed in the New York City area. As I moved through the ranks, I had the opportunity to make some positive changes. I like to think of myself as an open-minded handler/trainer and supervisor. My partners and I have had some successes catching bad guys, finding contraband, and collecting critical evidence that led to convictions. My career also awarded me the opportunity to watch many great men and women develop their everyday jobs into rewarding careers in canine.

As we all know, honest mistakes can be blessings in disguise – they allow us to develop and grow. No career comes without making mistakes. I certainly have made my share. The most important thing is to learn from them, find value in them and to share that information with others, so that they do not have to go through the same painful experiences as you did.

**Here is the real problem.**

In the current anti-police/pro bad guy era, where the good guys are now bad guys and the bad guys are now good guys, how do we properly defend the department from paying undeserving civil penalties and lessen the risk of the handler receiving penalties for doing his/her job – even when performed 100 percent correctly? When I say *penalties* (I cannot believe I am saying this) I mean getting arrested, prosecuted, and possibly going to jail.

**It is time to take a hard look at ourselves!**

Sometimes looking inward hurts. When is the last time we really looked at our policies? If you just read the word “policy” and I lost your interest because it is a boring subject, you are in trouble! Trust me, it is important and it drives training which is not boring!

Are we training to our policies? If you utilize another agency or an outside vendor, do they even know our department policy? Are the handlers getting enough scenario-based training where they make the decision to deploy their partner based upon the circumstances or are they just performing the same old training exercises of search, contact, release/recall over and over again? If so, this can be a recipe for mistakes.

It is my hope that the law enforcement canine community will swiftly step up and review each of our policies, improve our guidelines, modify our training, and deploy ***only*** according to them. I say swiftly because if we do not do it soon, it may be too late for some Units to survive. Canine Units will thrive if we develop policies that are legally, operationally, and ethically based. We must formulate them *prior* to mandated changes being considered by federal, state, or local authorities. We must try to police ourselves.

**What if we do not?**

In many areas of our country the use of force continuum is being reviewed at all levels of government. The uninformed outsider’s solution to our problem is easy to predict. It will be to abolish canine as a part of the “use of force” continuum. If we want to continue to use canines as a tool for law enforcement, we owe it to the good people of our communities to act quickly by providing a solution before canine gets “cancelled”. We each need a realistic policy that considers the strong anti-police trend. Most importantly, we need a system of checks and balances internally to make sure we carry it out. This undertaking is not just up to the handler. It requires buy in from senior leadership, administration, supervisors, handlers and especially training. If we do things right, funding will be available for us. If we do not it will dry up. The only thing worse than having no canine unit is having an underfunded canine unit.

I would like to offer a solution to lessen the likelihood of a negative outcome to a good canine deployment.

**Beginning of a Solution in Five Steps**

1. Leadership (with some community input) develops a practical realistic policy. This policy must not be done in the back office with just the risk management administrators and the legal department present. Those types of policies may check all the legal and liability boxes but they rarely work well in the field. If this policy is not formulated correctly, it will end up costing the department millions in civil penalties. With today’s negative attitude towards policing, it is possible to go as far as the handler being sued personally, the officer not be indemnified, even the possibility of arrest. If this policy is a failure, it may cost the department millions of dollars and could be the cause that would take the officers freedom. Therefore, it must be done correctly. What is the best way to accomplish this? Get input from **all** parties including training, supervision and most importantly, canine handlers.
2. Administration monitors how the policy is working in the field by keeping tabs on statistics. This includes training hours, certifications, bite ratio, etc.
3. Training adapts its practices to the new policies. Teaching must begin in the basic schools and regularly perform maintenance training only according to the policy. The best way to accomplish this is through scenario-based training. If we train properly, we will perform properly in the field. Canine training is just like firearms training; from start to finish, it is best if it becomes muscle memory.
4. Supervision and management must know the policy as well as everyone else, if not better. A boss in the field must have knowledge and this knowledge comes from experience. If the supervisor does not have actual canine experience as a former canine handler, he/she should at a minimum, attend canine training with the handlers so he/she recognizes how a deployment should look and understands the desired outcome. Some units will have a dedicated canine supervisor, some will not. It is impossible to hold a supervisor responsible if he/she does not have this knowledge to make proper decisions. He/she must comprehend what actions satisfy the Graham v. Connor decision and make sure that the reports reflect it. He/she should respond to every canine deployment. It is not reasonable to leave the handler with all the responsibility when they have so much to deal with.
5. Maintaining a connection with the community cannot be overstated. A simple example of this is by performing K9 demos at schools (only talk about bite work; do not perform it). Highlight the ability of the dog to detect contraband, find lost/missing people and locate evidence at crime scenes. Try to send a team to community events so the public can interact with the handler. Speak at career day and invite the PIO and the press along to watch. These are just a few ideas.

Police agencies in general and canine units in particularly need to proactively promote themselves to the public

In this good versus evil world, it is particularly important for all of us to remind ourselves how much good our canine teams can do for our community. Preventing crime by our mere presence, finding the lost elderly relative for your neighbor, or putting a dent in the flow of contraband that is killing our kids; none of this can be measured. Canines save lives!!

*Policies are not one-sized fits all. The policy itself is referenced not addressed here; it and other important items including training, legal and canine leadership will be addressed in separate upcoming articles by my very qualified cohorts (Lou Ferland, Scott Sargent, Steve White, and Gene Ramirez).*