*"He is your friend, your partner, your defender, your dog. You are his life, his love, his leader. He will be yours, faithful and true, to the last beat of his heart. You owe it to him to be worthy of such devotion."*

*~ Author Unknown*

**K9 Handler – Dog Bond**

The emotional bond between humans and canines is historically proven. Police officers routinely put their lives on the line, and the strong bond between officers partnered together is documented. When human, dog and dangerous job are combined; the relationship takes on strength well beyond the average.

**How It Begins**

Many occupations involve a person working in partnership with another, such as doctor/ nurse and writer/editor. However, in these occupations a partner changes regularly due to promotions, moves and the like. When a K9 officer and a dog are paired, it is intended to be a partnership for life -- typically the dog's lifespan, which is on average 10 to 12 years. The officer and his dog go through weeks of early training together, during which they not only learn to work together as a team, but before long they develop a partnership.

**Protect and Serve**

Most co-workers spend an average of 9 hours a day together, then go their separate ways. The K9 officer and his dog are a 24-hour-a-day package. They live together, work together and play. The officer is responsible for feeding, grooming and general health. They trust each other completely and are there to protect and to serve the public, as well as each other, on a consistent basis. It's more than a handler and dog relationship; it's often an equal partnership, as well as two friends keeping each other company, on and off duty.

**Work and Play**

The K9 officer goes through unimaginable stresses and relies heavily on his partner. Depending on the duty for which they were trained, together they will track or detain suspects who are often violent. They will search for potential bombs at schools and airports. They will be part of the dangers that fall upon border patrols. Together, they will search for missing people, or be part of a cadaver unit. Then they go home, and whether it's a game of fetch to relax, or simply dinner and TV, their work day is over -- together.

**Honor and Respect**

The K9 officer knows he may have a bad day, but his partner never will, and despite the dangers they encounter his dog will never be judgmental of the human race. K9 officers and their dogs have been shot together in the line of duty, and it's a good day when they both live to tell the tale. Police dogs have often died sparing the life of their partner and friend, and their friend isn't ashamed to shed a tear. Together, the K9 officer and his dog perform daily duties that save many lives. Their heroics often go unsung -- and their special bond often goes unknown.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES FOR K-9 HANDLERS
by
Dr. Saxe-Clifford**

With the proliferation of K-9 programs in urban police departments, psychological issues relating to the officer/K-9 handler are beginning to emerge.  Although there have been numerous articles written on K-9 programs to date, none address the effects of this particular assignment on the officer. Police psychologists, however, are beginning to see patterns developing among dog handlers.  As these patterns become clearer, preventive and remedial procedures can be incorporated into the overall K-9 program.

It is obvious to anyone who has been involved with a K-9 program that the officer and the dog assigned to work with him develop an extremely close relationship.  This is desirable for the effectiveness of the program. However, the close relationship may at times become exaggerated and interfere with the officer’s performance of police work or with his relationships at home.

**The Dog as a Partner**

It is often assumed -- and may in fact be the case -- that a police officer working with a dog as a partner is exposed to less risk than officers working alone or with human partners.  There are cases, however, when officers assigned to the K-9 program in an active department are assigned calls differentially. They may spend a great deal of time responding to calls involving burglary in progress or some other high-risk police activity. If this is the case, they may spend the entire shift under stress and at greater than average risk.

This issue was raised by an officer’s wife during a counseling session.  Although spouses are not generally concerned on a daily basis about an officer’s safety, this particular wife was.  She had been through her husband’s narcotic, vice and patrol assignments without undue concern, but she was particularly anxious when her husband was assigned to the K-9 program.  Her husband also thought this particular assignment involved more risk than any he had had to date.

When an officer develops a strong attachment to the police dog, he may become reluctant to put the dog at risk. If the choice is between risking another officer or the dog, the officer will respond appropriately according to his training. It is hoped that the decision would be made without even a brief and potentially dangerous delay. However, should the dog be injured, the officer would feel a great deal of guilt and responsibility for all aspects of the situation -- even those over which he had no control.

In one case, a dog inappropriately bit a juvenile.  Although the officer acted within department policy and could not have prevented the situation, the juvenile’s family sued the police department and the officer personally. The officer was involved in litigation for approximately one year, and during that time he developed anxiety relating to working in the K-9 program and in police work in general. Though he felt he had done his best, he was in jeopardy of losing his job, his home, etc.

Another problem often occurs when the K-9 handler is promoted or reassigned.  At that point, he may have become so attached to the dog that he is willing to purchase the dog from the police department in order to continue the relationship.  Some agencies allow such a transaction; others do not.  But even if the transaction is allowed, the cost of the trained dog may be exorbitant and may put undue financial pressure on the officer.  If he leaves without the dog, he may feel as though he is abandoning a friend.

**The Police Dog and The Officer’s Family**

In most cases, an officer who is assigned to the K-9 program boards the dog at his home.  Though this arrangement is usually discussed in advance with the officer’s family, a realistic picture of the situation is not always presented.  Usually the dog is considered a family pet, and his presence is believed to be an asset.

However, this is not always the case.  Some spouses may complain that the officer is spending more time with the dog than with the family.  In one instance, a wife complained that she had asked her husband to take walks with her after dinner every night for years and he had always been too tired or disinterested. As soon as the dog arrived, however, he promptly got up after dinner and walked the dog. She felt left out and relegated to second place.

In another case, the officer and his wife had agreed that the dog would become part of the family and would be allowed free rein in the house.  The first evening the dog was taken home, he destroyed the Christmas tree and all the Christmas presents and attempted to attack one of the children.  When the wife suggested that the dog be kept outside, the officer felt she was asking him to shirk his duties.  The dog became such a source of conflict within the family that the officer and his wife were close to divorce when they sought psychological help.

Problems with neighbors also develop on occasion.  Although neighbors may be comfortable with a police vehicle in the driveway, they may be less comfortable with a trained police dog in such close proximity.  At other times, families feel trapped at home by the officer’s assignment to the K-9 program.  They are reluctant to go on vacation because they do not feel comfortable leaving the dog in the care of others.

**An Administrative View**

Although in most instances officers find the K-9 program rewarding and satisfying, problems may emerge.  Some police administrators find they have an inordinately high turnover rate among officers assigned to the K-9 program compared to other specialized assignments.

One way to reduce turnover and accompanying costs is to institute a more extensive screening of applicants for the K-9 team.  Sometimes a more thorough explanation and review of the assignment before the decision is made as to which officer is issued a dog helps reduce disappointment on the part of both the officer and the police administration.

It is recommended that prospective K-9 handlers spend time with experienced K-9 handlers and even at kennels with trained police dogs if possible.  They should understand all department policies and regulations relating to the K-9 program prior to making their decision.  If resources are available, a discussion with a police psychologist would be beneficial, since the psychologist can look into the officer’s motivations and expectations and help assess his suitability for the program.  Interviews with applicants’ spouse may also be appropriate.  If possible, counseling services should be available if an officer assigned to a K-9 program develops family or job related problems associated with the assignment.

It should be noted that in most cases the officer/dog teams function well without serious problems, psychological or otherwise.  It is helpful nevertheless to be aware of all possible program ramifications.