Historically, 16 hours a month for police K9 training has been the standard for law enforcement agencies. This standard does not recommend which competencies a canine team needs for proficiency. Instead, we are left to infer a 16 hours regimen is in and of itself an adequate skill maintenance schedule. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The amount of time required for maintenance training for police dogs can vary greatly depending on several factors, including:

* the type of training being conducted,
* the dog's skill level, the handler's experience, trainer's experience,
* and the department's specific needs.

Thus, merely having a set number of hours for training fails to ensure that core competencies are developed, maintained, and enhanced. Core competencies refer to the capabilities, knowledge, skills, decision-making, and resources each canine team needs to deploy successfully. Competencies should include the handler, the dog, and the team. We think that core competencies should drive all canine team training.

Dogs are perpetual and context-based learners, meaning they constantly modify their behavior according to environmental stimuli. What has been learned in one place may not work as well in another. To address this reality, handlers must constantly think as trainers as they stabilize and improve necessary skills by mindfully taking dogs into different contexts. This process of generalizing behavioral fluency and stimulus control helps ensure dogs are prepared for the infinite variety inherent to operational deployments. It is how canine handlers learn their team's limits and strengths.

As this learning advances, so will the expertise levels of the team. Beyond being exceptionally well-qualified patrol officers, canine handlers must be thoroughly versed in training skills, including learning theory, classical and operant conditioning, shaping behaviors, exercise design, and clean training mechanics.

With this knowledge, canine handlers must decide whether and how to deploy. They must develop a deployment plan and adjust as circumstances warrant. The handler must know their agency rules on deployment and deploy accordingly as they support the agency's efforts to investigate and reduce crime as they build community trust. These elements are achieved through canine team competency in six work domains:

* Tracking/trailing criminal suspects
* Searching buildings or areas (both confined and open) for criminal suspects
* Locating items of evidence handled by criminal suspects
* De-escalation by giving advance notice of suspect presence and deterring flight or resistance
* Defending officers and innocent parties from criminal violence
* Physically apprehending fleeing/resisting criminal suspects.

Because canine teams are comprised of human officers and canines capable of autonomous action, competency acquisition, and assessment must have three prongs:

* Handler capabilities, knowledge, skills, and discernment
* Canine capabilities
* Aggregate canine team capabilities.

Minimum team core competencies are often assessed through certification, both initial and recurring. Certification standards set by governing legal or regulatory agencies must be followed. In the absence of legally mandated standards, agencies must obtain certification from a reputable third-party organization dedicated to enhancing police canine professionalism. Most canine team certification programs do not specify how necessary skills are acquired.

Currently, there are few, if any, law-mandated core competency assessments for knowledge and discernment required of canine handlers. Consequently, there is little legally mandated training and assessment. As a step toward remedying this deficiency, the following universal canine officer core competencies are offered for consideration.

As officers recurringly engaged in de facto tactical operations, canine handlers must:

* Gather, assess, and preserve information used to determine whether or not canine deployment would be compliant with policy and best practices
* Deliver, or ensure delivery of, multiple clear and broadly audible canine-specific pre-deployment warnings compliant with best practices
* Conduct a pre-deployment tactical briefing which:
  + Clearly articulates the crime(s) for which the suspect is wanted
  + Assign roles to search team members, delegating team leadership to another qualified officer so that the canine officer's full attention is on the dog
  + Clarifies canine-specific modifications to existing agency procedures, if any
  + Articulates circumstances warranting de-escalation efforts to include additional canine-specific warnings
  + Addresses team actions in the event a suspect is located without being bitten by the canine
  + Addresses team actions in the event a suspect is located and bitten by the canine
* Develop, communicate, execute, and adjust a tactical deployment plan as appropriate
* Deploy the dog in a policy-compliant manner consistent with its skills
* Work in concert with search team officers and other law enforcement resources
* Instigate and support the search team's de-escalation efforts as warranted and feasible
* Comply with post-bite procedures and best practices (i.e., medical care, supervisory notification, use-of-force documentation, and scene preservation)

Simply put, effective maintenance training is not about putting in time. Instead, it is consistently focused on building and enhancing core competencies through carefully designed exercises, repeated and practiced in different environments and contexts. This builds a robust canine team repertoire capable of meeting unforeseen challenges in deployments.

**The United States Police Canine Association's position is that canine handlers should ensure that training focuses on core competencies. Training hours still matter because they should be tracked in a manner that allows for easy analysis of their relevance to core competencies.**