

AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB WORKING TO INCREASE DOMESTIC DETECTION DOG SUPPLY

When he learned that there was a shortage of dogs to perform explosives detection in America, he knew he had to act.

K9 COP MAGAZINE™

By Penny Leigh, AKC Detection Dog Task Force

From the moment that his grandfather gave him a puppy at age 5, Dr. Carmen Battaglia has been fascinated by dogs. German Shepherd dogs are his favorite breed and Battaglia read everything he could about how the regal dogs served the military during wartime and performed heroic acts. Battaglia founded his own German Shepherd breeding program in 1960 and bred numerous champions and title holders in many endeavors. He became an expert in the breeding of dogs and an American Kennel Club judge.

When he became president of the German Shepherd Dog Club of America in the early 1990s, he organized a trip by the club's board to the US Department of Defense canine center at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

This began a long-time relationship between Battaglia and the military dog team, resulting in many trips to Lackland and Battaglia being named as an advisor to the Transportation Security Administration's canine program.

When Battaglia learned that there was a shortage of dogs to perform explosives detection in America, he knew he had to act. As a board member for the American Kennel Club, he took the issue to his directors and they formed the AKC Detection Dog Task Force. The task force has worked to document the current state of detection dogs' use in the United States and to explore how to increase the domestic supply of this crucial national resource.



"AKC has always been a leader in purpose-bred, pure-bred dogs. And these purpose-bred, pure-bred dogs have the skills, ability and breeding to produce the traits needed for detection dogs to successfully do their important jobs," Battaglia said. "It is a natural role for AKC to assist in meeting this national need to protect our country."

As acts of homegrown terrorism and mass shootings become everyday news in the United States, government agencies, schools, malls, sports stadiums and theaters are seeking the services of detection dogs. "Dogs are one of the best defenses against terrorism, due to their amazing olfactory ability, their mobility and their unique capacity to test air samples almost continuously with no 'reset' or 'purge' downtime. There exists at present no other instrument that even comes close to the overall capability of a dog," said Sgt. Wendell Nope, K-9 Program Supervisor of the Utah Department of Public Safety.

Most experts agree that there is no better detector of bombs than dogs, with one major problem: there are not enough canines to serve the growing need. The US Government imports about 80-90% of their working dogs from Europe, which has a rich heritage for breeding and training dogs for police/military style competitions and certifications. German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois remain the most popular choice for patrol dogs by law enforcement and many are dual-purpose canines that also perform detection work.

But the breeds in greater demand for public detection work are sporting dogs, including Labradors, Golden Retrievers, German Short-haired Pointers, German Wirehaired Pointers and Vizslas. These breeds are less intimidating to the public and their incredible hunting instinct is easily transferred to searching for explosives. Although these are familiar breeds in America, with the Lab being the most popular dog in the country, the US Government continues to import sporting dogs along with Shepherds and Malinois. And, due to growing terrorism threats and consequent demand for working dogs within Europe and around the world, there is now a shortage of foreign dogs available to protect the United States.



Photo credit: K2 Solutions, Inc.

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"My research reveals that approximately 80% of all explosive detector dogs now in service are imported from Europe. I see this as a huge risk, in that any interruption in the access to European dogs is likely to create a catastrophic deficiency in detector dog candidates," Nope said. "I feel strongly that the USA should not be reliant on a foreign entity for the acquisition of such a precious commodity."

The TSA's detection dog breeding program was eliminated in 2012 as part of budget cuts. This spurred former TSA Breeding Program Manager, Scott Thomas, to write the American Kennel Club and ask for support in encouraging a domestic breeding program that would reduce the need to rely on foreign sources for national protection.

"The irony is that as a nation we do not typically out-source the production of resources needed for national security. It is even more difficult to accept the fact that as a nation, we cannot meet our own needs for working dogs when we have so many breeders and dogs within our borders," Thomas said.

The AKC Detection Dog Task Force, headed by AKC Senior Vice President Mark Dunn, has interviewed key stakeholders involved in bomb detection including people from academia, government, military, policing, training and breeding. Subsequently, the AKC has launched several initiatives focused on Government Relations, Networking/Education and Breeder Outreach.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS – There are many obstacles that stand in the way of US breeders being able to easily sell dogs to the government for detection work, including low market price for top working line puppies and complicated government vendor contracts that make it difficult for individual breeders. The government has stated that European dogs are less expensive than buying US dogs but they do not include the additional expenses of travel that could last up to six weeks for their procurement team, including the related costs of a veterinarian, shipping the dogs and conducting health screenings and training while they are in Europe and again when they arrive in the United States. In addition, most legislators are unaware of the US's dependence on foreign dogs and the fact that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to meet US needs from foreign sources.

The AKC Government Relations team, led by Vice President Sheila Goffe, has made strides in bringing these issues to the attention of lawmakers. AKC Government Relations provided recommendations in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2810) to support using and developing additional sources for high quality domestically-bred working dogs. HR 2810 also requires the Department of Defense to provide reports on specific aspects of military working dog evaluation, procurement and breeding programs. This includes comparative costs of foreign versus domestically-bred dogs, availability of domestically-bred dogs and non-classified requirements for green dogs. HR 2810 has passed the House and as of this writing is under consideration in conference.

Goffe also was invited to testify on the issue before a Senate committee in October 2017, where she expressed the dire need for these dogs to protect the country. "Experts recognize that there is no better or more efficient way to detect explosives than through the use of high quality, specially trained scent detector dogs. Since the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and subsequent attacks worldwide, global demand for high quality explosives detection dogs has skyrocketed," Goffe said. "A shortage of appropriate domestically-bred dogs available for work as explosive detection dogs presents a significant threat to U.S. security."

NETWORKING/EDUCATION – The first AKC US Detection Dog Conference took place in early 2017 to start a conversation about increasing the domestic supply of detection candidates. The stakeholders and speakers included members of government, academia and private training/breeding facilities. A second conference will be held August 28-30, 2018, in Durham, North Carolina and trainers, law enforcement officers, breeders and all interested parties are invited to attend and learn more about the issue. In addition, the AKC committee members have conducted research to talk to the experts about the issue and needs, including visits to Lackland AFB, Auburn University Canine Performance Department and the University of Pennsylvania Working Dog Center.

BREEDER OUTREACH – AKC works with thousands of breeders around the country but most are unaware of the detection dog shortage. The AKC Feasibility Study committee is taking steps to communicate the need to breeders through presentations to kennel clubs and parent clubs and articles in AKC newsletters and magazines.



Photo courtesy of MTAPD

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THE RIGHT STUFF

The most successful detection dogs are developed from field and working lines known to produce dogs that can work all day without losing interest or energy. No one understands the importance of selecting dogs with the “right stuff” more than Capt. John Kerwick of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Police Department (MTAPD).

The MTAPD has the largest mass-transit canine explosives detection force in the country with currently 43 dogs in service and nine more in training. Their canine force must not only be skilled at finding bombs but also be able to work in extremely distracting and crowded environments. “We can’t have any issues with fear of anything that can happen within our system. An officer can be standing with his dog and have a 6-year-old come up and grab the canine by the nose,” Kerwick said. “The dogs have to walk near train cars and work in extreme temperatures and around very loud noises.”

The MTA purchases mostly imported dogs at the age of 12 to 16 months. Most dogs are German Shepherds, Belgian Malinois, Dutch Shepherds or a mix of those breeds. The MTA dogs are dual-purpose as both detection and patrol dogs but the explosives detection is their foremost focus, Kerwick stated. “I look for dogs that have confidence, high, high, high play drive and are environmentally sound. Our dogs are tested for every possible scenario they might encounter, including walking on perforated flooring with air coming up at them, loud noises coming out the darkness and walking near moving train cars.”

The MTA operates a 72-acre campus in a rural area and the facility features nine indoor-scenario train-

ing areas, multiple outdoor training fields, obstacle courses and areas with cars, buses, platforms and even a decommissioned train. The outdoor and indoor training grounds provide the MTA Police with an unlimited number of scenarios to teach, drill and test the dogs. “We have a highly elite canine unit,” Kerwick said. “Dogs are put through a rigorous testing and training program, and only about one in 30 are deemed skilled enough to join the MTAPD.”



Photos courtesy of MTAPD



But out of the dogs selected for the MTA training program, there is only a 10% wash-out rate, due to their stringent screening process, he added. Evaluating dogs and eliminating any issues early is key to a successful program, agrees Tracy Campbell, former K-9 Team Supervisor for the Fayetteville (NC) Police Department. After retirement, he joined K2 Solutions as chief trainer. Part of his job is finding

the best canine candidates for the demanding work.

“We test a great number of dogs,” Campbell said. “For instance, last week we tested 10 dogs that were procured from another vendor and they brought them to K2 for our evaluation. We selected two out of 10 to continue in the process to see if they can pass medical and several other exams before they enter our training program. We fail a great number of dogs for environmental reasons and for not having the drive to hunt and chase their reward.”

Most training programs want to purchase dogs at about a year of age so they are ready to move into advanced training. But this can be difficult as not all breeders are willing or able to keep a puppy for several months, so some training centers have started puppy programs so they can accept younger dogs. K2 Solutions has started purchasing puppies as young as 8 weeks, as well as breeding some of their own dogs “because there is such a demand for these dogs and the supply of good dogs is not there,” Campbell said. “We are hoping that the proper breeding, proper nurturing and training them as puppies will make them really good working dogs. The first group of puppies are doing great but are still too young to begin our actual training program. A few more months and they will be ready.”

Regardless of the age or breed, one thing is certain: purpose-bred dogs have the advantage for a successful career in detection. “We used to take dogs out of the pound and try to make them into something that they were not supposed to be,” Kerwick said. “Starting with a dog bred for this work makes our jobs easier.” 🐾

For more information about the AKC US Detection Dog Conference 2018 or the AKC Detection Dog Task Force, contact the author at pxl@akc.org or call (919) 816-3749.

Join us at the

AKC

US Detection Dog Conference



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