Law-enforcement agencies often do not factor in the ongoing training and maintenance costs required to operate a canine unit.

Implementing, Mana

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ACEK9.COM

A comprehensive look at the K-9 supervisor's role

BY DAVID DORN

MANAGERS OF TODAY'S law-enforcement agencies would be sadly mistaken in thinking that implementing a detection program is as simple as buying a dog and sending an officer to dog-handler school. As an officer, I first started researching the topic in the mid-1990s. I found several books that had been written in the late 1970s and a few from the 1990s. More recent research has convinced me that few up-to-date writings exist. Of those that do exist, few, if any, cover the pitfalls in creating experienced trainers, training programs, and standards of implementing the canine team into the practical application of a daily working environment.

ging, & Maintaining A DETECTION K-9 UNIT

maintaining a detection K-9 unit

Left to right: Departments need a training program that begins after the initial handler/canine training school has been completed. Hiring a qualified, certified trainer is an important part of implementing a K-9 unit. Here a canine undergoes basic muzzle training.

In the past 12 years, I have progressed in my training from canine handler to canine unit supervisor, handler instructor, and canine trainer. I have made it a point to attend as many conferences and seminars as possible. I've found that a lot of them had the words "supervising" or "managing" in the course titles. However, most of the courses fell short of the topics' current considerations. The subject matter focused mainly on departmental liability and the reliability of the dog, rather than on the handler–dog team and what should be done to assist them or to make a more efficient and effective unit. Clearly, there are missing links within our goals of implementing, managing, and maintaining a canine program.

We know that canine handlers are in one of the highest risk positions in law enforcement, and we also know that few departments spend the extra time and money needed to fully train them to handle the increased tasks that come with the job. The overwhelming consensus of the hundreds of canine handlers and professionals I have talked with over the years is that law-enforcement managers do not receive enough education on the issues involved in managing canine units, and that there is a void in handler training, from the training field to the actual working environment.

I believe that given the proper budgetary support, implementation, and ongoing, in-service, follow-up training with a qualified canine trainer, many problems could be avoided. There is a distinct difference between training and handling a dog. A handler cannot train a dog simply because he is handling one. Canines, handlers, and management *all* need consistent, ongoing training. The trainer is an essential partner who works not only with the handler and canine throughout the course of their careers, but also provides common-sense consultation to management.

This article discusses common mistakes in establishing, implementing, managing, and maintaining a canine program and offers solutions.

Common Mistakes

Often, canine programs are started without having the following in place:

- Emotions to drive the start of the program.
- A thorough consideration of the costs.
- Policies and procedures.
- A training program.
- A structured instructor program.
- Adequate handler training.
- An understanding of case law.
- Practical application.
- Supervision of the unit.

Let's consider those issues one by one.

Emotions to drive the program

"The public loves to see canine units." "A K-9 is a great public-affairs tool." "Everyone loves dogs." Those statements do not represent good reasons to acquire a K-9. A dog used mainly as a public relations tool is not cost-effective. Your proposal to initiate a K-9 program should include statements concerning need, effectiveness, liabilities, training, initial and ongoing costs, and your research. It's important to make the case for why your department *needs* a K-9, and discuss the benefits you expect from the unit.

Consider the cost

"Once we have figured the initial cost of the dog, the remaining costs will be minimal." Unfortunately, that is not the case. Many times we overlook continuing costs such as handler overtime, stipend pay, travel, equipment, vehicle, initial training of dog and handler, maintenance training, and so on.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF ACEK9.COM

Right: Following basic training school, a two-week field training officer (FTO) program and monthly, ongoing maintenance training sessions are the minimum for training new handlers and K-9s.

Policies and procedures

Beware of statements such as: "We'll keep the policy manual short and only put in the bare minimum." "We'll just copy another local agency's stuff." "We don't want to put in too much stuff; it will tie our hands in some situations." A policies and procedures manual protects both department and handler and guides them concerning what they can and cannot do. It can protect personnel from complaints and frivolous lawsuits. It also educates other command and line staff about what the unit can, will, and will not do. Personnel writing the policies and procedures manual should have knowledge of canine units — possibly as a handler or canine supervisor from another agency or as a professional canine legal expert. The department's new canine trainer should be involved and be asked to make suggestions.

The manual should include the following: what the unit was created to do; definitions of terms; division command and chain of command; handler responsibilities, training-aid storage procedures; request for services (mutual aid, public affairs, special responses); deployment of the unit; training; reporting and documentation requirements; uniforms and equipment; veterinary preferences; emergency veterinary care; certification; unit vehicle maintenance; home kenneling requirements and maintenance; handler compensation; qualifications and standards of selection; and procedures for removing the trainer, handler, or canine.

Training programs

Handlers. "Once the dog is trained, we'll select a handler and they can hit the streets." "We'll pay to send the handler to a two- or three-week — or even a two- or three-month — handler course with/without the dog and then when he/she is done they can handle all the dog's training after that." "We will just train with other local agencies." Those are arrangements commonly used by administrators to cut costs. They cannot afford to send officers to an in-service field training officer (FTO) for eight to 12 weeks because the handler would be off the streets for that amount of time.

However, the problems with those types of arrangements are numerous. Typically, a department purchases a trained dog from a private vendor or facility. When the dog's training is complete, the handler attends a three-week handler course to learn how to work with the dog. The team then hits the streets and problems start almost immediately. In most cases, the handler has never handled a working dog before. The handler is not going to learn from a three-week class how to work out the problems on his or her own. In that amount of time, a handler gets the bare minimum of information about how to handle an already-trained dog.

Trainers. Departments commonly choose a K-9 trainer or private vendor based on the many years of experience they have and the fact that a lot of agencies are using them. With that in mind, how could one imagine that a handler who has three weeks of training; one who has three years of experience; or one who works with another local department but has never had a documented, certified-trainer course is qualified to be the department's K-9 trainer? Most departments promote the fact that they train above and beyond Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), which is the bare minimum. Consider, then, that to become a California POST-certified canine team evaluator requires five years experience as a law-enforcement handler or trainer and a minimum of 200 hours

of documented training in the area of testing/evaluation, including a one-day POST Canine Team Evaluator Course.

Canines. Because the demand for detection canines is so great, K-9 facilities, trainers, and private vendors train and sell dogs quickly. Even with the minimum turnaround time, they are unable to keep up with the demand for dogs. Fortunately, most are reputable and care about their product, and they put the proper time into the dog before placing him.

Ultimately, the problem lies with a department's selection of handler candidates and the lack of ongoing in-service training for the canine team. Although the candidate might have the desire, he/she may not have the personality to become a good handler. An experienced dog handler or the department's qualified canine trainer should be able to help in making the selection or determining what the standards and qualifications should be for the handler position.

Departments need a training program that starts after the initial canine and handler training. The program should include an FTO period of in-service implementation, practical application of the new canine team on the street, and ongoing maintenance training.

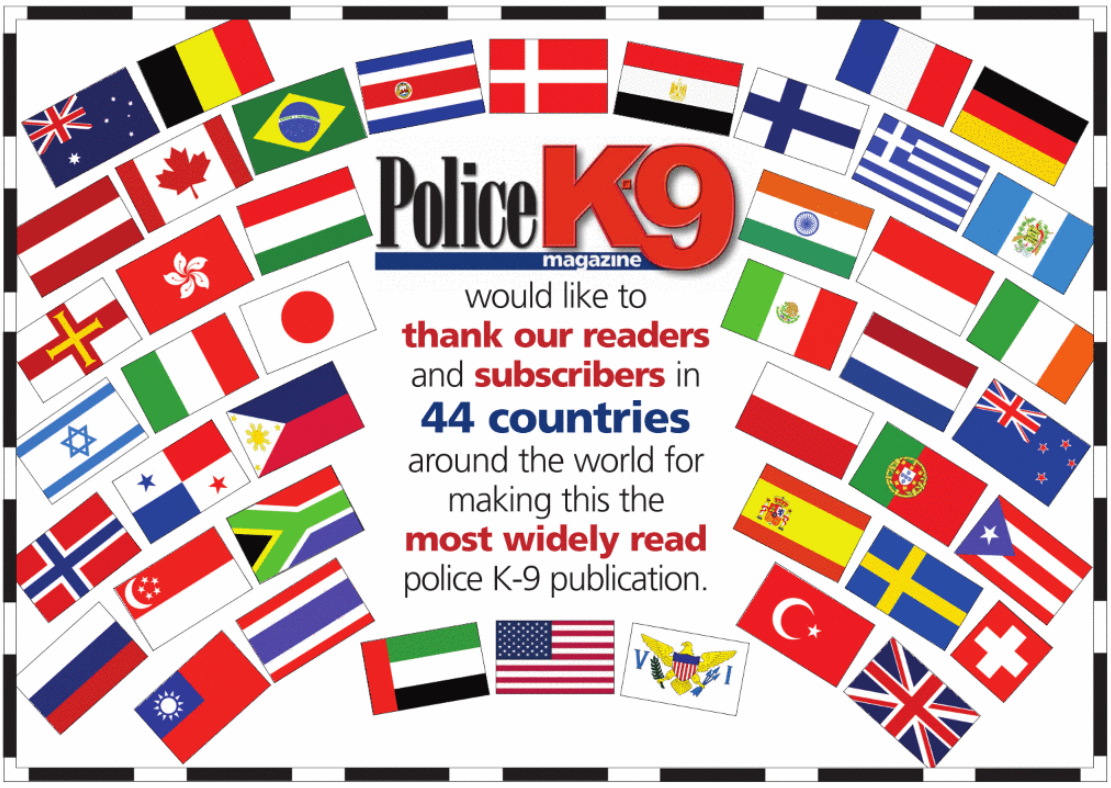
PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF ACEK9.COM

Case law and practical application

Information about case law and search-and-seizure laws typically is not included during the dog/handler training provided by the trainer or by a private vendor or facility. Some canine associations do provide updated handler training at their conferences and seminars. Those seminars address handler issues and current case law, interdiction techniques, courtroom issues, and many other important issues. Associations that offer seminars include the California Narcotic Canine Association (CNCA), the United States Police Canine Association (USPCA), the Western States Police Canine Association (WSPCA), and *Police K-9 Magazine*'s Handler Instruction & Training Seminar (HITS).

An information gap exists regarding practical application: how, when, and in what manner the canine should be deployed and where the canine should be kept before, during, and after a search. That gap leaves questions in the new handler's mind, such as, Should I keep my K-9 in the car or have him out of the car and ready? Should I put him on a "down" after the sniff is complete or put him back in the car? An FTO program implemented at the department for a period of two weeks, with the trainer, and a monthly, ongoing maintenance program should be the bare minimum of training for K-9 handlers.

Additionally, a four- to eight-week training program should be conducted by an existing canine team at the department; the team will act as FTO to the new handler. The FTO will ensure that the trainee is properly instructed



Left: Training should include as many real-world and problem-solving scenarios as possible.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF ACEK9.COM

in all tasks, and that the trainee understands the instructions on how to perform those tasks in the course of his or her duties in the canine unit.

An FTO program should include orientation to the department's canine unit history, departmental K-9-related forms, department policies and procedures for the canine unit, K-9 health, vehicle and home kenneling procedures and maintenance, veterinary procedures including a clinic visit, local case law, courtroom testimony reviews, liability, deployments, and training scenarios.

Deployments and training should be done with the canine trainer or conducted in the way the canine was trained. It's important that the FTO (if not a certified canine trainer) knows how the canine was trained so as to avoid retraining. This is not the time for experimentation, inconsistencies, or opinions and suggestions from other trainers or handlers.

Merely placing odors out during a deployment does not constitute training. Setting up short searches, lengthy searches, multiple areas to be searched, blank areas to be searched, and problem-solving— all with the trainer — constitutes real training.

Supervision

Common supervisory errors include the following: "Anyone can supervise and evaluate the Canine Division." "All shift watch commanders can supervise the canine handler on their own watch." "A line staff person (handler) is not going to tell me (corporal, sergeant, or lieutenant) how, when, or where he or she is going to run our department dog."

It is important for administration, division, and watch commanders not to display ego issues when it comes to

canine command. The supervisor needs to support the goals of management, other supervisors, and the line staff as a team. If the canine team is properly trained as we have discussed, the supervisor should trust that the team is a self-initiating, efficient, and effective tool.

Establishing, implementing, managing, and maintaining constitute the supervisory foundation for an efficient, effective, and productive team. It is never too late to go back to the basics and evaluate what is working and what isn't and, with the assistance of the professionals, implement new procedures or additional training.

If possible, the unit should not be tied into a minimum staff level per shift. The canine team should float and be available to all shifts when needed for warrants, searches, and trainings. If the team is tied to a minimum of a shift, it will be difficult for team members to be released for trainings, off-shift searches, veterinary visits, and other canine-related events as they come up (and they will come up).

Unit supervisors must be familiar with the unit's policies and procedures manual and ensure that

- unit members are getting the proper amount of training time (all teams should train at the same time),
- the trainer is doing his or her job (is on time, is listening to the handlers' problems, is problem solving, etc.), and
- handlers are attentive at training, on time for work and training, and turning in the correct documentation and paperwork in a timely manner.

The supervisor should handle work scheduling; scheduling of additional training (seminars and conferences); and recordkeeping, including use of the K-9, deployments, finds, and training. He or she should also attend the team training sections and accompany the handlers to conferences and seminars. Supervisors need as much education as possible. They must know how the canine teams were trained in order to understand why they deploy and work the way they do.

Summing Up

The handler is responsible for the canine; as a supervisor, you should be able to guide the team and support it in its tasks as discussed in this article. Over-supervising or micromanaging is counterproductive. Educate yourself and the command staff about how the team works.

During the proposal phase of establishing a new canine unit, check with other agencies, handlers, and trainers, and see what works and doesn't work in their systems. Don't be afraid to make changes when you see something better come along for the canine team. Any questions regarding any canine issue should be brought to the trainer's attention and should be answered. Most importantly, the assertion, "That's the way it's always been done," does not make something right for today's new canine teams.

David Dorn has worked in law enforcement for more than 14 years. For the past 12 years, he has worked for the San Francisco Sheriff's Department. He handles, trains, and supervises as a senior deputy in the Canine Unit, which he implemented in 1998. Contact him at k9dorn@aol.com.