

WHY CALL VOLUNTEER CANINE SEARCH AND RESCUE UNITS?

BY SUSAN BULANDA

If an adult or older teen does not come home at the expected time, the family typically waits to act until they feel that the person should have contacted them or until they are sure that the person is missing. Even if the person missing is a child, the family will often look for the child themselves, calling friends, neighbors in any location where the child might be.

Once they determine that the person is truly missing, they call the police who may come and search the area. If the police do not find the missing person or they determine that the area has been searched by the family and friends, they call the local fire department.

The local fire department will then conduct a hasty search or a grid search depending on the terrain and local geographical features. When that is exhausted, the volunteer canine search and rescue units are called.

By this time, the missing adult person may have been gone for up to 24 hours. A child may have been missing for two or three hours. The area that the missing person could be in grows exponentially with every passing minute. If a missing, healthy adult travels for two miles, the search area circling around the Point Last Seen (PLS) or the Last Known Position (LKP) would be 12.5 square miles. If the person walked for five miles, that circle would be 78.5 square miles. All of it must be searched.

By calling the volunteer canine search and rescue unit immediately, the chances of finding the missing person quickly are greatly increased. Waiting hours could be life threatening for the missing person due to possible injury, medical issues and weather conditions. Volunteer units are just that: volunteers and a fee is never charged to the agency that calls them or to the family.

What is also important to consider is that by calling the volunteer canine units, the police and fire departments could save many man hours and overtime if the search runs into the night. Volunteer SAR units search 24 hours in shifts.





Most canine units have personnel trained and certified as incident commanders (IC) and search managers to help the requesting agency coordinate the search effort. In some cases, depending on the police or fire department's policy, only one IC from the department may be required to stay on site. By freeing their resources, the department is available to assist regular incidents, such as a fire or accident.

SAR units do not mind if enroute to the search, the missing person shows up and the call is suspended. They are always glad for a happy reunion with no injuries.

Volunteer canine units offer dogs that have been trained specifically to look for all types of missing people. There are units that specialize in mountain rescue, avalanche, deserts, heavy forests, cities, suburbs, natural and manmade disasters. The

dogs are also certified for cadaver searches above ground, underground and in the water. They offer both air-scent dogs who look for any human scent in the area and scent-specific dogs who look for a given scent.

The dogs may be able to quickly determine which direction the missing person traveled. If they cannot do this, they can clear areas to verify that the missing person is not in that search sector. However, just as important, they can find clues. There may be only one person missing, but there will be many clues.

Unfortunately, some units do not have certified dogs and dog handlers. It is important that an agency work with a unit where all of the dogs are certified in their given discipline with a national organization and renewed periodically. The dog handler must also be certified

as a rescue person first and a dog handler second. The dog is one of many tools that a volunteer canine search and rescue unit uses to find the missing person.

The primary certifying organization for canine search and rescue with members nationwide is the National Search Dog Alliance (NSDA), who offers certification tests throughout the United States in all disciplines. You can subscribe to both newsletters at no charge: SAR Dog News at www.sardognews.com and www.n-sda.org.

Police and fire departments would be wise to check which volunteer canine units are available in their area. Most canine units are willing to travel long distances to a search, so it is important to include units that are an hour or more travel time away from the local area. When a department makes a list of units available, it



would be diligent to call the unit and find out what resources and certifications they have. This way, when an incident occurs, the department can call the canine unit immediately and have a standby unit in mind in the event that the mission lasts longer than 12 hours, which is the typical shift time for teams in the field.

Also, by checking a unit's certifications, the department will protect itself from liability issues.

It is also important that the local and state police and fire departments meet with the leaders of the SAR teams to establish a working relationship. This should include the boundaries and expectations that the local agency has concerning SAR units. This will ensure a smooth working relationship for all who would be involved.

It would be beneficial if some of the members of the local police and fire departments participate in a joint training at least once a year with the volunteer SAR unit(s).

Calling a volunteer canine unit immediately for a search can save the missing person's life, save the requesting department the cost of many man hours and free local resources to handle local calls. Having a working relationship with local SAR units will provide assurance and instill confidence for the residents of the area and the family of the missing person. It is a win-win partnership.

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