

Sheriff's Department Canine Unit

Report of the 2000-2001 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury

SUMMARY

An investigation by the Civil Grand Jury (CGJ) of the newly-formed Canine Unit operating within the San Francisco county jails finds the Unit to be extremely valuable. The Canine Unit unearths contraband narcotics hidden within the jails, thus providing value as a deterrent to those considering further criminal narcotics violations. Also, the Unit discovers "collateral" contraband, such as homemade keys and a wide variety of weaponry. The members of the Sheriff's Department responsible for institution of this unit are commended for their work in this regard.

Further, it was found that while the canine (also known as a "canine officer") is certainly an integral part of the Unit, it is the Unit's thorough operational procedure instituted at its inception, the initiative and high performance standards maintained by the deputy charged with handling the canine, as well as his conscious cultivation of an intuitive relationship with his charge, which renders this a uniquely valuable resource to both the Sheriff's Department as well as the people of San Francisco.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Sheriff's Department facilitate the following changes:

Provide the Unit with a mechanically reliable, unmarked car or one with removable magnetic logos in order to ensure the safe transport of the Unit during off-shift hours.

Provide the Unit a "laptop" computer with spreadsheet capability to facilitate the accurate record keeping necessary for a unit of this type and with multiple database capability allowing for variable internal reviews.

Expand the number of officers assigned to the Canine Unit, under the direction of the deputy in charge of the Unit, to ensure that the existing standards for both canine training and officer performance are maintained.

Study the feasibility of expanding the Unit to include "passive alert" canines in order to best facilitate a canine checkpoint for visitors and other outsiders to pass through prior to being granted entry to the county jail facilities.

BACKGROUND

On April 20, 2000 the San Francisco Sheriff's Department (SFSD) activated the Canine Unit (SFSD K-9). This unit consists of one canine officer and his SFSD deputy handler. The handler is certified through the California Narcotics Canine Association (CNCA). He has imposed upon both himself and his canine higher standards than those required by the CNCA for certification.

In the course of this investigation, the CGJ observed the Canine Unit in operation at the county jails, had several meetings with the handler, reviewed quarterly reports, and reviewed the operations manual. Members of the CGJ also interviewed and observed a representative of the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department Canine Unit conduct a search of the Sonoma County Jails, spoke with several leading canine trainers and representatives of the California Narcotics Canine Association as well as several representatives from the Lone Police Department, San Bernardino Sheriff's Department, and the San Francisco Police Department Canine Units. These units all operate both in

the jails and in-house search situations and adhere to the standards laid forth by the CNCA.

The Unit uses both random searches and searches based on inmate tips, and averages approximately one search of a facility per week. The sporadic nature of the visits is due partly to the limited resources of the Unit, but to a large part it also is by design in order to deflect attention from the aforementioned informants. Extra personnel assigned the Unit would be beneficial to provide increased coverage in the areas searched at a single location rather than an increase in search frequency.

During searches, all inmates are removed from the area to be searched. The SFSD K-9 Unit never comes into direct contact with any inmate. This is vital to ensuring both the safety and the effectiveness of the canine officer. The canine officer assigned to the SFSD K-9 Unit is a single-purpose narcotics detection canine and is not cross-trained as a "bite dog". Any aggression by inmates or others towards the canine officer is highly damaging to the confidence and, therefore, to the viability of the canine as a detection tool. It is standard within the industry that under no circumstances should the canine officer be used for the actual searching of inmates. Should this type of detection be desirable to the SFSD, efforts should be made to obtain and maintain a cross-trained canine with "bite dog" capabilities such as those utilized within the SFPD.

In the twelve months covered by the quarterly reports submitted by the SFSD K-9 to the CGJ, the Unit uncovered the following contraband:

Controlled Substance Pills

314

Lighters/Matches

106

Tobacco

92

Rock/Base Cocaine

71

WEAPONS

41

Marijuana

37

Amphetamine

5

Heroin

5

These items were found both grouped in hidden caches and individually in amounts as small as 1/16 of a gram. In addition, the Unit uncovered contraband food, homemade "pruno" alcohol, a jail-made handcuff key, a size 7/16 Power Master wrench, a tattoo kit, and an actual handcuff key.

The SFSD K-9 Unit is compliant with the standards set by the CNCA. However, it is the opinion of both the operating deputy of the SFSD K-9 Unit and the CGJ that, due to both

the secretive nature of inmates and the small amounts of contraband available to them, the standards of the CNAC (which rely on rather significant amounts of contraband) are somewhat ineffective within the jail setting.

The canine officer should be commended for his ability to detect extremely small quantities of contraband. There is also value in maintaining the sobriety of those held in custody. Additionally, the detailed examination of any area to which the canine "alerts" has led to discovery of a wide variety of hidden weaponry. While there is no "street value" to these weapons it is the opinion of the CGJ that their detection and removal from the county jail facilities further justifies the SFSD K-9 Unit's value. The thorough procedures of this deputy, as well as those assisting in follow-up searches, elevate this newly instituted program from a valuable resource to one that the CGJ considers truly invaluable.

In addition to the Unit's functional value, deputies conducting follow-up searches in conjunction with the Unit note that the existence of the Unit has prompted an increased level of detail to these and other routine searches conducted by deputies throughout the jails. This is of particular value since the SFSD deputies assigned to the county jails ultimately are charged with the safe operation of the facilities, not the SFSD K-9 Unit.

While it is understood that the operational value of any new unit must be proven before expansion can be considered, it is the opinion of the CGJ that the SFSD K-9 has indeed proven its value and is deserving of further expansion.

Lastly, the only aspect of the Canine Unit that was found to be substandard was the transport vehicle for the Unit. This vehicle should be replaced with a mechanically reliable vehicle. Further, the vehicle should either be unmarked or issued magnetic SFSD logos in order to assure the safety of the Unit during both the off-shift commute and the time the canine spends with his handler on non-working days. Given the costs incurred and expertise inherent in this unit, the CGJ believes that any steps, such as a low profile vehicle that with minimal expense improve the safety of the Unit, should be taken.

FINDINGS

The San Francisco Civil Grand Jury finds that the SFSD K-9 Unit uses a thorough and concise operations manual, maintains accurate records, and through the initiative of the deputy handler provides a unique service to both the inmates and Sheriff's Deputies by removing a large number of contraband weaponry and narcotics.

After observing other dual-purpose canine units, it is apparent that there is a level of "patrol" mentality within the majority of handlers. The canine is relied upon to alert the handler to contraband. However, the deputy assigned to the SFSD K-9 Unit eschews this "dog and master" mentality and truly works with his canine charge, climbing over and wriggling under all surfaces of even minor interest to the dog with an eye towards further examination. It is truly the belief of the CGJ that this degree of involvement by the human deputy is integral to the success of this unit.

The SFSD K-9 Unit is a sterling example of the initiative that a city department can take. The Sheriff's Department is commended for their initiative in this regard and is encouraged to expand the Unit within guidelines determined through consultation with the deputy in charge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The SF Civil Grand Jury recommends the priority funding of a reliable vehicle outfitted for canine transport to the SFSD K-9 Unit. Further, the CGJ recommends that this vehicle should have the capability to lower its "profile" when off duty either through a plain "unmarked" paint job or through the inclusion of SFSD logo removable magnetic signs to an "unmarked" vehicle so as to prevent acts of retaliation and ensure the safety of the SFSD K-9 Unit when the Unit is both outside of San Francisco and/or off duty.

Required Response

Sheriff - 60 Days

2. Recognizing that the recording and maintaining of data regarding the activities of the SFSD K-9 Unit are vital to the effective operation of this unit, the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury recommends that a "laptop" computer with both spreadsheet and multiple database capability be made available to the Unit immediately.

Required Response

Sheriff - 60 Days

3 The effectiveness of the initial SFSD K-9 Unit has demonstrated the value in its expansion. The value of the Unit relies upon the performance level set by the deputy in charge of the Unit, and any expansion should be undertaken with his supervision and approval. With those caveats, the CGJ recommends that the existing SFSD K-9 Unit be expanded at those levels deemed proper by the deputy currently in charge of the Unit.

Required Response

Sheriff - 60 Days

4. In the course of this investigation it was pointed out that a large degree of contraband is smuggled in during visiting hours. The canine officer assigned to the SFSD K-9 Unit is an "aggressive response" canine. Therefore, unacceptable levels of liability are inherent in use of the Unit to search visitors. It is apparent to the CGJ that this is an area in need of attention. The CGJ recommends that the SFSD examine the possibility of augmenting the "aggressive response" canine in the SFSD K-9 Unit with a "passive response" canine, to be used in parking lots and in entry areas prior to allowing visitation.

Required Response

Sheriff - 60 Days