

So You Want to Be a K9 Handler?  
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### **So You Want to be a K-9 Handler?**

What is the most requested information that comes into the national office? It is how do I become a canine officer from students and those in law enforcement wanting to improve their chances at selection.

If you are currently not employed as a law enforcement officer you need to focus on gaining employment in the field. The choice to just apply for a K-9 position in an agency is not a reality. I am sure somewhere there are departments that will hire you and a trained canine right into that position. These are smaller agencies, auxiliary or part time staffed positions that are not restricted by labor agreements, civil service, or other restriction larger agencies have. I am sure there are many officers who work such arrangements. I admire these dedicated officers who give so much, work those lonely shifts with the nearest back up 30 minutes away, but for a profession and career you need to aim at higher goals. When your financial survival depends on your career you need to seek employment in midstream departments. Now if you are interested in only part time work than something else may suit you?

If you are a student in high school you need to look at college and a background in criminal justice. A career in law enforcement is getting limited to some college work and many require degrees. If you still need to pick a course of study and looking for a career in law enforcement you need to tailor your studies towards that goal.

I recommend those with serious career intentions in law enforcement, not only K-9, but also just as a career choice, direct your efforts at an agency that has good career opportunities. If you really want to become a K-9 officer you apply to those agencies that already have an established unit. Go slow and learn the department. Police officers, Sheriff Deputies, etc. view a new guy that tries to move to the head of the list with caution. One of the worst things you could do is being overbearing and forceful. For the first three years of your career, work at being the best officer you can be, a line officer. Be a team player with good work habits.

When an opening becomes available in any K-9 unit, there are usually numerous applicants for the job. In most cases the applicants are well meaning and have excellent work records; however in many cases they are simply not cut out for the job. Several do not know anything about the position they are applying for. I have served on selection panels both for canine positions and on assessment panels for promotion. I have found applicants are not entering into the position for the right reasons, they don't realize how much is involved, or they just don't have the qualities that are required for a K-9 handler or a supervisor.

### **WHAT DO THEY LOOK FOR?**

Many of the same qualities that are needed for a successful K-9 handler are the same for a successful supervisor. It is also for this reason many departments limit the time an officer can be in the unit. When they select the qualities needed they also select the qualities to make leaders in an organization. Sure I was in that position as many handlers find themselves in today, "Being a K-9 Handler is all I want to do." Sure I understand handlers not wanting to leave the unit. I was happy as was my family with the canine assignment. Fifteen years, three different partners, I was

doing what I loved and would have remained content just being a 'dog man', but is staying really what I wanted? Interviewers will ask, "What are your career goals?" I sure had second thoughts that first week I was sergeant. My career for 15 years was being responsible only for doing a job and my dog. I knew the job and never got tired or bored, everyday was different. Sure it meant missing many school functions, cub scouts and family outings but my family also knew I had the best partner God could provide, a 'Second Guardian Angel'. When choosing a K-9 handler I need to know the feelings of their family. Working a police canine places many extraordinary stresses on the family, and it is important that the officer's spouse fully understands the implications of this career move. You will work mostly night shifts and many weekends. The hours are long and you will frequently be interrupted during family events to respond to call out emergencies when you are off duty. Your time off is not really your time off, as you will be required to maintain your canine on your off duty days. Going on vacation will now entail making arrangements for someone to dog-sit your partner, or kenneling him/her while you are away. Taking the dog on vacation is also an option. You will also need to exercise your partner daily whether you are at work or at home, so your off duty time is no longer entirely off duty, as you must deal with your K-9 partner on a daily basis. For this reason it is important that everyone in the family understands the changes that will occur, and that they are accepting of those changes. As a K-9 handler you will need extra support from your spouse on many occasions with work related stresses, so it is critical for the family to be taken into consideration when choosing a K-9 handler. This position demands the full support of your family just as in the career of law enforcement but more so. Without the family support, stresses pull at the canine and confuse them. Canines do not understand disagreements between husband and wife. Canines do not understand family problems and only know the people they love are upset. If the canine is the center of the disagreement it becomes a major stress and performance factor.

The K-9 position is almost unique. The only other position dealing with a partnership and reliance on an animal is the mounted unit. The K-9 position demands a bond between the handler and the canine. The handler must be willing to give up some of their own freedom as the dogs are giving all of theirs. No more running free and chasing cats. The hours of work are long and sometimes boring and frequently will interfere with family expectations. Making the canine part of the family, gaining their support for this demanding position, the handler must be extremely flexible in their thinking, be able to make decisions on the fly, and be dedicated to the position more than what is required of most normal positions within the department. The officer needs to learn to think as a K-9 handler, not as a police officer with a canine.

In preparing to be successful in our goal of being a K-9 handler when applying for the position within our agency, we need to prepare ourselves properly. These steps will actually benefit us in our career and we will have a better understanding of the specialty units and our department. We should know what the position demands are. Many times in an interview you will be asked, "What do you envision the duties of the position are?" So many times candidates do not know or answer, "Oh I think it would be neat to have a dog." Whatever positions you apply for know what is expected. Almost a given question will be, "Why do you want to be a K-9 officer?" The interview is not the time to be fumbling and mumbling. Sit or stand erect and look the panel in the eyes when answering. Be confident, but not overly, listen to the question, think about it and answer. You may have a head start, maybe as prior military handler, or other extensive training as a handler. This should provide a better understanding of the unique requirements of the position, but it can also be baggage that may incompatible with the philosophy in training

currently in the agency. Draw on the experience but be humble. Do not give the impression of “Been there, Done that.”

The primary duty for the K-9 team is to search for and locate suspects or evidence that can be linked to a specific crime scene. The K-9 unit is one of the few investigative tools that are available to the patrol team. Special units in law enforcement are being down sized or disbanded all together. Budget concerns have seen many special units reassigned to line duty. The K-9 unit is the only special unit that strengthens the ability of the line to provide police service. The K-9 does not replace officers, but enables the patrol force to be more effective and permits better manpower utilization.

The support service provided by the K-9 section can go beyond the obvious. They can be used to locate missing persons, detect illicit drugs or explosives and to back up patrol on calls where the canine’s physical abilities may deter or prevent a violent confrontation. The K-9 is not a positive cure for crime but it is a proven deterrent to criminal activity. Another function that you will need to perform as a dog team is public demonstrations. This may seem unimportant; however it is vital to the success of a good K-9 program in that it builds support from the public sector. It also brings positive media support, which is a must for any department wishing to have a successful K-9 section. Public awareness can be positive and supportive but it can also be destructive. The abandonment of a K-9 program can be surprisingly swift with the onset of bad press and negative public pressure. A good team must realize that the purpose of the dog team is to serve as a support service for patrol officers. Your obligations are to your fellow officers, just as identification section is a support service that responds to a crime scene at the request of a field officer, and so is the mandate of the K-9 unit..

You are there to assist patrol in locating evidence for a case or in tracking down a suspect who has left a crime scene that patrol is investigating. You cannot be successful as a K-9 handler without the support of patrol. The K-9 handler has to be a team player able to be positive in relations with fellow officers. Your credibility will go a long way in getting the assistance you need from them. You see like it or not, the police K-9 is a “Show Dog.” The argument that I have a street dog and not a show dog is not reality. Every time you and your K-9 respond you are the ‘show’. Fellow officers, supervisors and the public all watch in anticipation, you and your canine are in the spotlight. A street officer and a street dog are truly on center stage and the biggest show on earth when needed. Never make excuses for you or your dog if you come up empty handed. In my experience as a handler if you catch the crook, you and your dog are heroes. If you come up empty handed, nobody on your shift knows you anymore. If you really have a problem controlling your dog everybody will hear about it, so you do have to have a ‘Show Dog’. Law enforcement is constantly under citizen’s review.

Reasons for unsuccessful deployments can be almost anything. In some cases there is just too much contamination and interference of the scent for the dog to work it successfully. There will be days when your dog is just not up to it, just as there are days when you get up and just don’t feel like going to work. Your attitude and professionalism will be apparent in the manner in which you apply your dog. Ensure that you are always justified in applying the dog before putting him out. In other words, ensure that the crime for which you are deploying your dog meets policy. Remembering the facts at the time of deployment will justify the deployment not

facts obtained afterwards. If there is any doubt at all, do not apply your dog in a manner that will allow him to make physical contact with the pursued subject. The dog team is not out on the street to provide a form of street justice by inflicting excessive and unnecessary injury. No where can excessive force be tolerated. As part of the selection process, applicants need to have a good work history free of bad decisions and personnel problems. Know your department policies and especially those regarding dog applications and adhere to those regulations. Those policies will provide you with job demands specifically tailored to your department's need that will guide you in your deployment.

Once you become a canine handler, join The United States Police Canine Association, Inc. Be active with other officers and network with them. Share concerns, talk about mutual issues, help and assist each other. Take part in certifications and training that is offered. The determination and involvement you develop will determine whether you make a beneficial contribution to the role police K-9 play in modern law enforcement or whether you become a liability that undermines the good work of many men and women before you.

### **WHY USPCA CERTIFICATION?**

Please read <http://uspcak9.com/html/message.shtml> and visit [WWW.USPCAK9.COM](http://WWW.USPCAK9.COM)

### **WHAT IS A GOOD DOG HANDLER?**

It depends on your viewpoint. An administrator is going to be looking for certain qualities that he or she feels is important. They are looking for officers who can work with a minimum of supervision, and are not prone to citizens' complaints or excessive use of force complaints. The administration wants an officer who is not going to become a liability problem when handling a K-9. Ideally, they should also be searching for candidates that are considered high caliber officers from within the department; however this is frequently avoided by administrations as they do not wish to place someone that is promotable into the K-9 section. The K-9 unit is one of those sections that for some reason have historically been a section where very few agencies will allow officers to go through promotions and stay within the section. As a result, some of the best candidates for the positions are not considered as they are 'reserved' for other positions the administration feel are applicable. Sounds far out? Well it does happen, but the reasons given will never be, Your too good!

As a trainer, I prefer a candidate who is an aggressive, streetwise cop who can work on his or her own with little or no supervision. I look for problem solvers and not problem makers.

The candidate handler needs to have a minimum of three years active street patrol, they need to know the operations and specialties and know this is the job they want. They need to be able to handle stress and think on their feet. The prospective handler needs to have some natural ability to associate and communicate with animals. While this may sound unusual, it is in fact, very vital. Most people have some ability to associate and understand animals, however there are some officers who get into the position who might make excellent evidence technicians or become expert traffic analysts, but have no natural abilities in working with animals. Their heart is in it, they work hard at it, but that ability to bond with the dog just isn't there.

I look for an officer who is personable, and is comfortable speaking to a crowd. Being a K-9

handler offers you a unique opportunity to be a public relations ambassador for your department, and for policing in general. The K-9 section of the police department is the most requested section of the police department for demonstrations. The demonstration of a well-trained police K-9 to the public provides a positive view of the section and brings public support for the department. This can be particularly important in times of crisis when the department may come under scrutiny from time to time in the media for actions that are sometimes perceived in a negative light by the public or the media. The annual certification in a USPCA Trial will support your credibility as an effective law enforcement team. The certification attests to your meeting of a national standard and if you can host a trial in your area it will highlight you and your canine's ability.

Sometime we have officers apply to get the attention. They have a goal to promote themselves and use the K-9 for media attention. As much as this may sound offensive, it does happen. Although we all like to be compensated for work, we also get applicants who are more interested in the financial rewards rather than having an interest in the K-9 program.

When evaluating candidates, I review their work history looking for that officer that seems to run over bad guys. This officer who is an instant heat score the minute he/she gets on the road. If there is criminal activity out there they will find it. The officer is always in the right place at the right time. I try to determine attitude towards the job and the public that they serve. I review recent performance evaluations for insight into work history. K-9 officers do more frequent emergency responses than other members of the department; therefore they need to be very proficient in driving techniques. An officer with a history of patrol car accidents may not be a good candidate for the position.

The candidate officer needs to understand that handling a K-9 has become a very real liability concern not only for his agency, but also for himself. The candidate needs to understand that the K-9 has to be properly housed when off duty. Just as no right thinking officer would leave his gun unattended on the front porch, they would not leave their K-9 in an unattended manner that could injure someone or himself. The handler must be prepared to handle himself accordingly when deploying his canine partner, and the candidate officer needs to be able to show restraint at times when it seems difficult to do so.

The officer must understand that he or she will form a very strong relationship with the canine, as will the officer's entire family. The police K-9's job is to protect the handler but when the bond becomes strong some handlers will not put their K-9 in harms way. The K-9 is not a sacrificial lamb to be used on suicide missions. The K-9 is used where officers cannot go safely when critical information is unavailable. The availability of bullet vests for K-9s has produced the misconception that it makes them bullet proof, it does not. Each handler must remember that there are people that are not afraid of the officer or their K-9. The K-9's highest function he can perform is to lay his life on the line so an officer can go home. There is the distinct and very real possibility that they may have to face the day when the K-9 could lose its life in the line of duty. The officer's family has to come to an understanding from the outset.

Your unit will be judged on the way you work. Every handler will end up with the canine he/she deserves. It has been said, "Look at the canine and you will see the handler. Look at the handler

and you will see the canine.” The K-9 unit cannot exist in a vacuum; they need to avail themselves to other officers, trainers and K-9 administrators. The United States Police Canine Association, Inc. is dedicated to improving the ability of the canine in law enforcement. To be an active part of this association will further you and your canine’s ability and give your department a truly professional unit.