

Education and support for those assisting injured K9s

Operational K9 team provides special outreach

By Cheryl Hentz
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We've all heard stories of firefighters saving family pets from a house fire, maybe even seen a photo of a dog or cat being given oxygen after being saved.

But knowing how to make that mask properly fit the face of a family pet is not something that automatically happens or that firefighters just naturally know how to do. It must be modified to fit the face of a dog or cat. That's exactly how Operational K9 Medical Team of Wisconsin first got its start.

About 20 years ago, the Town of Grand Chute Fire Department was gifted some oxygen pet masks but had no idea how to use them. They contacted the Fox Valley Animal Referral Center in Appleton – now BluePearl Specialty and Emergency Pet Hospital – for help.

"We showed them how to modify them to fit dogs and cats and explained how they should treat pets that were involved in a house fire, a car rollover accident or something like that," said Lyn Schuh, certified veterinary technician (CVT) and veterinary relations representative for BluePearl Fox Valley & Green Bay. "It was my understanding that the Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association had something called the Breathe Right Initiative and that every fire station in the state had gotten these masks.

"That was years ago, but even today, if we roll up to a firehouse and say, 'Get your masks out,' many times they haven't even gotten them out of the bag."

Seeing the need for the kind of expertise they could provide, Schuh and some



Submitted photo

The Operational K9 Medical Team of Wisconsin helps first responders better deal with animal injury incidents.

other staffers at the Referral Center began providing similar services to other fire departments, law enforcement agencies and the like.

But when BluePearl, a national company that owns many veterinary clinics, purchased them, they didn't fully understand the need for or the various nuances of what they were doing and weren't supportive of continuing that kind of outreach work.

"Then COVID hit and I, along with Dr. Lisa Converse, said now is the time (to start this nonprofit)," Schuh said. "I was working from home, she was working from home, and we said that if we were going to start a nonprofit to (continue this work), we needed to do it then."

Schuh, Converse and fellow CVT Kris Eggleston at BluePearl founded the Oper-

ational K9 Medical Team of Wisconsin in 2020, picking up where they had left off after BluePearl took over.

With the assistance of veterinarians, veterinary technicians and members of the human medical community from around Wisconsin, they educate first responders and K9 handlers statewide on point-of-injury and pre-hospitalization medical care for their K9 partners. The highly technical content and hands-on training covers K9 emergency medical treatment to be rendered at the scene of injury before transport to higher-level veterinary care.

In addition to law enforcement K9 teams and first responders, the Operational K9 Medical Team also educates search-and-rescue personnel, military K9 teams and firefighters. A typical class consists of lectures, basic exams and education of K9s to advance lifesaving procedures using scenario-based training.

"The class is eight hours long. It consists of a lecture in the beginning. A lot of these people know that the front end (of a dog) bites and the back end poops, and that's where their knowledge stops," Schuh said. "They don't know what's normal and what's not normal; their dog could be limping for days and they may think that's just a normal gait.

"We go over the physiology of the drugs that these dogs may be exposed to and how to treat for that; we go over smoke inhalation, internal bleeding, how to place a chest seal, how to do a needle decompression, and so on."

Besides lectures, the morning session also includes break-out sessions using their own educational dogs that are agreeable to being handled by multiple people because sometimes K9 dogs are not, especially if they're around several other K9s in a room.

"Afternoon sessions include just a little more lecture on bloat and GDV (gastric dilatation volvulus), and then we have five different break-out stations. Some are on cadaver dogs, some are on a robotic simulator, while others are just doing a scenario, such as a human handler and their K9 are both down and they have to figure out what

to do," Schuh said.

The Operational K9 Medical Team of Wisconsin is one of just a handful of similar organizations in the United States. So much in demand are the services of this all-volunteer nonprofit that it cannot keep up. They all work full time, mostly in the veterinary industry, including a firefighter and a U.S. Army reservist.

"We are so far behind on requests from around the state. I truly believed when we started this nonprofit – and I still believe this – that we could do this full-time," Schuh said. "It's just finding a way to get money to do it, because we don't charge a per-person fee; we only charge a class fee.

"We know these departments don't have (much) money; we know these guys don't get enough training that they need with their K9s. So we are adamant about not making a profit off of the information we believe they should have when they hit the streets."

They were just gifted some space at the Apple Valley Veterinary Clinic, so are in the process of moving from Oshkosh to Appleton. There they will have a 600-square-foot training facility and two offices they can use.

"They also donated us a freezer that we can store our cadavers in so we can purchase those when we can and keep them on hand instead of trying to scramble around to find them when we need them," Schuh said. "They also donated us a conference room so we can have meetings. Gold Cross Ambulance Service donated us an ambulance that we can use for training."

The team also works to help pass legislation for first responders and K9 handlers to protect them. They were actively involved in the passage of state Senate Bill 435 in 2018, which made it legal for human professionals to treat animals on the scene.

Schuh said they also have the option to decline treating some animals.

"If someone brings up an alligator from their basement in a house fire, they (don't have to provide medical attention). And that has happened."

They are currently working with Wisconsin Vest-A-Dog to compile a complete Operational K9 Registry for the state.

"We're also trying to work on a transport law where ambulances and EMS – whether privately owned or owned by a hospital – would be protected if they transported an operational K9," Schuh said.

The vision of Operational K9 is to be the leading state resource on education and legislative advocacy for law enforcement, firefighters, EMS personnel and medical professionals on pre-hospital care.

"We want to be the umbrella, a first point-of-contact for these officers, these sheriff's deputies, these K9 handlers. We might not be able to solve their problem that day, but we might be able to give them an answer they'll need the next day," Schuh said.

"In-the-field treatment absolutely does work and point-of-injury care saves these dogs' lives. We just have to keep getting this training out to handlers."

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