

K9 FIRST RESPONDERS

Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings

Cheshire, CT Home Invasion Murders

Kleen Energy Power Plant Explosion

Hartford Distributors Mass Shooting

Boston Marathon Bombings

Amtrak Train Derailments

TWA Flight #800

LODD

What do these tragedies have in common?

ANSWER: Psychological Trauma

ISSUE: Psychological Trauma during and after a crisis, tragedy or critical incident e.g. school shootings, domestic terrorism, airplane crashes, train derailments, workplace violence, weather events and other community tragedies.

How do we manage the impact of psychological trauma? How do we lessen its effects?

COMMUNITY NEED: Mental health resource to immediately connect and engage those impacted by crisis or tragedy. Jump-start the connection to mental health support and the path to personal/community resilience.

RESOURCE: K9 First Responders are specially trained handlers and dogs leveraging the canine-human bond to start the healing process. They are able to connect and engage with impacted persons when other traditional approaches prove inadequate.

DEFINITION: A K9 First Responder is a handler and dog trained as an “All-Hazards Psychological Trauma Response Team” supporting the re-establishment of a person’s cognitive and emotional equilibrium who has been impacted by psychological trauma.

MISSION: K9 First Responders, Inc. (K9FR) is a psychological trauma response organization providing aid and comfort to those in need.

CONCEPT: Science has long recognized the principle of the canine-human bond. K9FR Teams leverage that emotional bond to connect with victims and survivors.

By interacting with those impacted, dog teams help create an emotionally “safe” interaction for a victim, survivor or First Responder. People decompress without any expectations of having to talk or share their thoughts. This is the first step in rebuilding a person’s, and community, resilience.

SUPPORTING SCIENCE: Medically, interacting with dogs reduces negative physiological responses in victims, survivors and other impacted individuals such as:

- Anxiety
- Blood pressure
- Stress Hormones: Adrenaline, Cortisol, and Norepinephrine

Conversely, there are increases in dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin and prolactin... the “feel good” hormones.*

*Citations: Katcher, A.H., Friedmann, Beck, A.M., Lynch, J. (1983), Wilson, CC. (1991), and Barker, S., Knisely, J., McCain, N., Best, A. (2005)

Biochemically, “emotional memories” are the most enduring memories our brain processes. Memory consolidation is the process by which short-term memories are converted into long-term memories and stored in the brain. Stress hormones negatively impact memory consolidation.**

K9FR Teams are effective because the presence of the dog lowers stress hormones and provides a positive emotional interaction during the consolidation phase of memory creation. The benefits can be seen months and years later by decreased traumatic stress issues. When asked about their memories from the time of the tragedy, the dogs are spoken of fondly. Adjectives used include “safe, calming and healing”.

** Citation: Jahan Porhomayon, Sergei Kolesnikov, Nader D Nader (2014)

SIMILAR ORGANIZATIONS: The K9FR concept is unique. No other crisis/disaster dog organization operates in this fashion; First Responders at trauma scenes interacting with victims and survivors bridging the gap between the incident and connection to mental health services.

POPULATIONS SERVED: School Systems, Businesses, Hospitals, First Responders and General Public.

- Schools: Shootings, violence and untimely deaths impact schools more than ever. Social Media reinforces and extends the trauma.
- Businesses & Hospitals: Workplace violence and aggression have been prominent over the years. K9FR Teams can be used to provide immediate stress relief and help employees defuse and regroup.
- Public Safety: Stress related conditions are common for fire, police and emergency medical services personnel as well as other first responders. Repeated and constant exposure to violent events, horrific injuries and highly charged emotional situations contribute to the daily stresses these selfless public servants face.
- General Public: Mass casualty events, transportation accidents, and critical incident violence impacts many people. K9FR Teams help build community resilience and personal connection to support systems.

K9FR Teams are available to, and effective with, all individuals regardless of race, creed, color, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, age, height, weight, physical or mental ability.

K9FR is an additional resource for Public Safety Peer Support programs. Our specially trained dog teams create a safe emotional place for First Responders to defuse and open up about their experiences.

HISTORY: The Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings left Newtown, CT reeling. Connecticut’s Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services needed a resource to quickly connect and engage with students, teachers and First Responders. Dog teams from Yale-New Haven Hospital were requested by crisis counselors. Teams worked with

crisis counselors for days and weeks afterward. The result was a much quicker acceptance of mental health support than traditional methods.

The dog teams had a strong positive impact on the victims, survivors, First Responders and the Newtown, CT community overall. The idea of creating K9FR grew from this successful response.

Later when the Boston Marathon Bombings occurred, K9FR was asked to bring the dogs that worked at Sandy Hook. The framework of this concept has been refined and formalized since then to the present day K9FR.

OPERATIONS: K9FR is a volunteer-led organization that develops, trains, operates and deploys in a manner similar to volunteer fire departments or community emergency medical services organizations. One important difference is that our response area is geographically larger.

The organization is designed to be operationally self-sufficient and does not require resources a response partner might need. K9FR provides teams with food, water, shelter, field transportation, mobile office & communications, and emergency electricity.

TRAINING: K9FR volunteers require a minimum of 32 hours of training that focuses on Psychological First Aid, intervention techniques, National Incident Management System, varied Local, State and Federal response protocols, operations, communications, logistics and First Responder self-care.

An additional 24 hours of training in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is necessary for volunteers assisting in Peer Support programs.

On-going training is provided as well as participating in local or regional public safety exercises.

INSURANCE: The organization maintains commercial general liability coverage; \$1million coverage per occurrence and \$2 million aggregate. This coverage includes automobile liability and personal injury.

SCREENING: Prospective volunteers go through an interview process and multiple evaluations. Prospective therapy dog backgrounds and visitation profiles are reviewed.

Volunteer candidate backgrounds are independently researched by a private investigation agency. Areas researched are:

- Identity Verification
- Driving History
- Volunteer Background
- Criminal History: County, State & Federal
- Sex Offender Registry: National
- References
- Outstanding Warrants
- Civil Records: County, State & Federal

Dog Handlers also have to receive a veterinarian's recommendation for their dog to participate as well as health statements for both the handler and their dog.

OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE: K9FR organizes personnel and operations consistent with emergency management standards as to easily integrate into a variety of response protocols e.g. governmental, municipal, schools and hospitals.

Service/Coverage/Response areas are defined in one of three ways:

- State or County boundaries
- 50 mile response radius
- Population density up to 10,000 people per square mile

A Strike Team is assigned to a particular state, county or region. A Task Force is composed of Strike Teams. The number of Strike Teams is based upon the population density of a service region. Strike Teams are comprised of 5-7 dog teams and assigned support personnel.

RAPID DEPLOYMENT: Emergency medicine refers to the "Golden Hour" when treating traumatic physical injuries. Treatment within that "hour" increases the likelihood of a person's physical recovery.

The same concept applies for psychological trauma, except that our response time frame is within the first 48 hours. On-call teams mobilize within an hour of a request.

EARLY INTERVENTION: It is important to utilize K9FR dog teams prior to a person's memory consolidation of events. "Consolidation" primarily occurs during sleep and within just a few hours of an incident.

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and Psychological First Aid (PFA) require engagement of the impacted person. The first hours and days after a tragedy are challenging. An impacted person often hasn't had time to process what has happened. S/he has difficulty being able to articulate their thoughts and feelings which is an important aspect of PFA & CISM.

The dogs facilitate interactions with mental health support as a low-key and non-judgmental approach. Early intervention by a K9FR Team provides connection and engagement at an emotional level... without talking. This facilitates the behavioral health process and eventual acceptance of continued support.

NOTABLE DEPLOYMENTS:

- Feb 2017 > Smyrna, DE prison siege, hostage taking & homicide
- Oct 2016 > I.M.P.A.C.T. 2016, MCI Level 3 / Active Shooter - Regional Exercise
- Aug 2016 > Vernon, CT House Explosion
- May 2016 > Officer Tarentino LODD, Auburn, MA
- Feb. 2016 > I-95 Casino bus crash/rollover, Madison, CT
- July 2015 > Arrigoni Bridge Incident, Middletown, CT
- June 2015 > Jonathan Law High School, Milford CT
- May 2015 > Dawson Avenue Beach, West Haven, CT
- Dec. 2014 > Cheshire High School, Cheshire, CT
- Nov. 2014 > RMT Johnson School, Bethel, CT
- May 2014 > Harborside Middle School, Milford, CT
- April 2014 > Jonathan Law High School, Milford, CT
- March 2014 > RHAM Middle School, Hebron, CT
- Jan 2014 > RHAM High School, Hebron, CT
- May 2013 > Fairfield, CT train derailment
- April 2013 > Boston Marathon bombings
- Dec 2012 > Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy, Newtown, CT

K9FR Teams have been requested more than twenty-five times since December 2012. Seventeen of those deployments have been in 2015.

AFTERCARE: Community relations and local support is an on-going aspect of our aftercare program. We attend parades, 5k runs, motorcycle rides, fundraisers and special events to provide a public appearance as well as continued support. Our dog teams maintain social media accounts to foster indirect support and comfort.

RESPONSE PARTNERS: Relationships have been developed with the following agencies:

- Connecticut Commission on Children / Office of Emergency Preparedness
- Hartford, CT – Fire Department & C.E.R.T.
- Vernon, CT – Office of Emergency Management, Fire Department & C.E.R.T.
- Milford, CT – Board of Education & Youth/Family Services
- West Haven, CT – West Shore Fire Department & Board of Education
- Norwalk, CT – Police Peer Support
- New Haven, CT – Police Peer Support
- Fairfield, CT – Police Department / Critical Incident Team
- Cheshire, CT – Board of Education
- Madison, CT – Police Department & EMS
- Ledyard, CT – Police Department
- Bradford, CT – Fire Department
- Middletown, CT – Fire Department
- Avon, CT – Fire Department
- Danbury, CT – Fire Departments

- Delaware Dept. of Corrections
- American Medical Response (AMR) / CT Peer Support
- Behavioral Health Consultants, LLC
- Boston, MA – Dept. of Public Health / Psychological Trauma Responder / EMS Peer Support

K9FR Teams are used by a variety of agencies; Fire and Police Departments, Emergency Medical Services, Schools, Boards of Education, Hospitals, Offices of Emergency Management, and Departments of Public Health.

TESTIMONIALS: “These dogs won’t erase the memories, but they did provide immediate relief, which was critical.” – *Dr. Irving Jennings, MD, Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services at Sandy Hook and Chief Executive/Medical Director of Family & Children’s Aid, CT. June 2013*

“As a trained clinician, I understand that during times of tragedy and profound grieving, there may be no words or skill sets available to begin the healing process. Dogs can reach those in pain by just their presence alone. They have an innate sense and ability to provide comfort that no human does... far better than any of the adults can do. Our job comes later...” – *Lisa E. Diamond Graham, M.S., LMFT, Director Milford Youth and Family Service, Milford, CT. July 2015*

“We see people at their worst and their time of need...you really take it home and it affects you mentally. The dogs come in and bring all smiles to everybody...and you really see it work.” – *Chief Stephen Scafariello, West Shore Fire Department, West Haven, CT. May 2015*

“After 12/14 happened (Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings), I finally got my daughter to leave the house and visit the crisis counseling center. The dogs got her in and with a dog she finally talked to another adult.” – *Jill Kuric, Mother of Sandy Hook Elementary School student. April 2014*

“There were kids who were in the classrooms (Sandy Hook Elementary School)... one little girl came up and only talked to a dog. Another student from Miss Soto’s classroom wouldn’t talk to anybody else told his whole story while the dog was sitting there and he was coloring and just said it out loud... he was able to say what happened... that stuff is beyond powerful.” – *Deidre Croce, Crisis Counselor, Newtown, CT. December 2012*

“Maybe there is a drowning in the water where people congregate on shore waiting for recovery and to find the victim. It is a great place for the dogs to be brought in to help manage the crowds.” – *Chief Patrick Pickering, West Haven, CT Fire Department, May 2015*

AWARDS & RECOGNITION:

- Newtown, CT > June 2013
- Animal Medical Center, New York, NY > December 2013
- State of Connecticut Citation for Outstanding Service > July 2014
- City of Milford, CT: Recognition for Community Service > July 2014
- Cheshire, CT Community Service Award > March 2015
- 2015 Myra Kraft Community MVP Award for Outstanding Volunteerism from New England Patriots Charitable Foundation > June 2015

FEES CHARGED: K9FR is an all-volunteer organization and never charges organizations or individuals for its services nor does it pass along any incurred costs.

K9 First Responders, Inc.
58 River Street
Milford, CT 06460-3341

P) +1 (203) 951-1494
E) k9fr@k9fr.org
W) <http://k9fr.org>
W) <https://www.facebook.com/K9FirstResponders>

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