The AKC Dog Detection Task Force & Patriotic Puppy Program

HELPING TO ADDRESS THE SHORTAGE OF U.S.-BRED WORKING DOGS

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In the United States there is a serious shortage of qualified dogs to perform the much-needed role of explosives detection. After 9/11, Boston, Brussels, New York and London, the number of terrorist attacks continued to increase and so did the demand for these talented dogs.

In 2016, the United States Senate held several hearings about the security of the U.S. infrastructure. The Senate learned that about 80% of the patrol and detection dogs used in the U.S. are purchased from European breeders, which means that the U.S. relies on others to produce a necessary resource for our safety and security. Witnesses at those hearings suggested that a domestic breeding program would help solve the problem of dependence on European breeders. Following those hearings, I was approached and asked if the American Kennel Club (AKC) could help.

I described the problem to the AKC Board, and they agreed that AKC, with its 158,000 breeders, 5,000 clubs and more than 20,000 events, should get involved. In 2017, AKC launched a pilot program called the AKC Dog Detection Task Force (DDTF) which began with a few staff, AKC board members, and a consultant. The mission of the program was to "study the areas in which the AKC could help address the crisis and the shortage of high-quality explosives detection dogs needed for U.S. national and public security while also advancing recognition of AKC as the preeminent authority on canines."

During the first two years of this pilot effort the DDTF made visits to breeders, vendors, government organizations and law enforcement agencies and established a focus on three major areas:

- *Conferences/webinars* that would bring together experts to study issues impacting the problem, and to share and advance knowledge.
- *Government Relations* that would work with policymakers, administrators, and other government officials to positively impact procurement and policy areas.
- *Breeder education and outreach* that would raise awareness levels among breeders about the shortage and potential opportunities for U.S. breeders to participate in a solution.

Since then, three stakeholder conferences and numerous

monthly webinars have been held. These efforts attracted many breeders, vendors, and organizations willing to help. University researchers and experts from the private sector came together to collaborate and study subjects related to working dogs which are now underway in a number of areas including: canine DNA, nutrition, breeding, training, testing and evaluation. The research that continues is passed along to breeders updating the "best practices" which are now science-based (Bray).

Those familiar with working dogs agree that behavior is one of the major factors that influences their deployment as detection dogs. Multiple studies support the notion that successful working dogs are highly trainable (Maejima, McGarrity*). Other studies about the unsuccessful working dogs show they tend to be more anxious and fearful of strangers and non-social stimuli (Goddard, Duffy, Harvey**). This has led

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to a growing number of studies that are focused on finding better ways to breed, train and produce them. Many of these studies are seeking to determine which specific elements of canine behavior are necessary and which are disruptive. Other studies are assessing the behavioral tests used in the selection of assistance, protection, and detection dogs (Bradley). When combined, these efforts are documenting the qualities deemed most important for detection dogs and those needed by their handlers and trainers (Rooney, Ronin).

The AKC Government Relations/public policy efforts are also contributing. They are working with congressional staff on related legislation, testifying before congress on the scarcity issue, and working with members of congress to impact legislation and government policy related to procuring dogs, obtaining data on current program outcomes, developing breeder advisory programs, and improving government transparency for contracts, purchasing requirements and communications with breeders.

When combined, the breeder education and outreach programs have developed an extensive number of educational materials to assist all breeders in the breeding and raising of confident puppies that might have a future as working dogs. One of the most visible education and outreach programs has been the DDTF's pilot known as the "Patriotic Puppy Program" (PPP), which provides opportunities for breeders and owners to work closely with experts in the raising and development of candidates needed for explosives detection work. The purpose of the AKC PPP is to work with AKC breeders to provide a suitable and reliable source of "green" dogs that are ready for purchase by law enforcement for advanced training to become successful explosives detection dogs. The PPP works with individual breeders, trainers and puppy raisers to *help train and prepare puppies for a future as a detection dog.* The program is designed to help owners and trainers place qualified dogs when training is complete. In working closely with a subject matter expert, participants receive training to help them establish a path to successfully breed, raise, and sell detection dogs, after completion in the AKC program. The Patri-

otic Puppy Program also works with breeders who are expecting a litter and willing to retain at least one promising puppy through 12–15 months of age. These breeders work with a subject matter expert who helps them train and develop their pups.

Across the United States one can find about thirteen different breeds being used in dual-purpose patrol and detection work. But the breeds most sought-out for detection work are the Labrador Retrievers and German Shorthaired Pointers (GSP). While many other herding and sporting breeds are successful at this work, these two are best known for reliable temperaments in public settings, high energy, and a strong hunting drive.

One of the objectives of the DDTF is to learn what works and what needs attention. Both are being studied by the researchers, experienced breeders, and subject matter experts. During the last year, the PPP has stepped up the pace and is now making on-site visits to breeders to assess and evaluate the training of candidates in the program. Regular meetings are also being held with breeders to discuss their problems and the better ways known to manage and train puppies. A regular series of DDTF webinars has been added that involves experts in the field. Topics include issues and questions from the breeders such as: Getting Puppies Started Right, Comparing and Contrasting Successful Approaches, what vendors are looking for in pups, prices paid for puppies, and more.

The Patriotic Puppy Program is driven by breeder/ trainer and detection dog subject matter expert Stacey West. West has extensive experience in all aspects of detection dogs ranging from breeding and raising, to U.S. and overseas deployments, to contracting. He is also a former AKC field trial judge. He is well-suited to the challenge and has expanded AKC's nationwide effort to develop new sources of high-quality U.S.-bred, raised, and trained detection dogs that are needed to protect the infrastructure of the United States.

Interested breeders/trainers can participate in the PPP with their dogs at a number of stages. The program is divided into breeder readiness groups. These are:
- Breeders with dogs waiting to be bred
- Breeders with bitches in whelp
- Breeders with litters on the ground
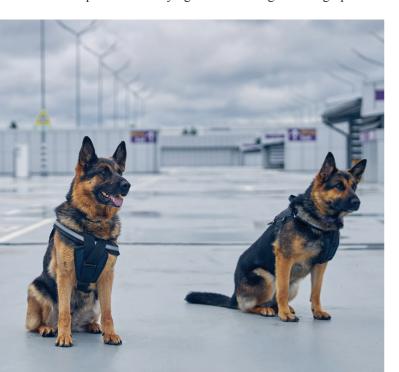- Breeders with candidates in training

In the past year, the program has more than doubled in terms of participants and geographic range. Currently, PPP boasts 35 active participants from 16 states. The number of breeders showing an interest and willingness to participate signals that the program is taking hold. More than 100 individuals are now attending monthly webinars to learn more about the program and how they might become involved. Although phase two of the PPP is less than a year old, two dogs have already been deployed: one with the Maine Fish and Game Warden, and another with the Ellsworth, Maine Police Department.

The DDTF is also working with a variety of organizations to increase the impact it can have on addressing the detection dog shortage. The AKC Reunite pet recovery service, which sells microchips and helps in the recovery of lost pets, has a program called "Adopt a K-9 Cop." This program makes grants of up to $7,500 for the purchase of a new dog or the replacement of one that has retired or been lost to injury or death. Twenty-six grants have already been made, and those dogs are now on the job. The impact of "Adopt a K-9 Cop," coupled with the work of the TF is a big plus for AKC, the Task Force, AKC Reunite, and America.

Another collaboration was just announced between the AKC and the United States Police Canine Association (USPCA) which is the largest police K-9 organization in the United States. The USPCA is helping to further the betterment of working dogs, especially those that serve in our communities. This relationship provides AKC breeders and trainers with better insight into the needs and requirements of detection dogs while also familiarizing law enforcement with AKC breeders. The combined benefits of these two efforts are not limited to just the breeds and the breeders involved in the Detection Dog Task Force and the Patriotic Puppy Program. They are advancing research in breeding, litter and puppy development, pedigree evaluation, and puppy training. The benefits from these programs are helping all breeders and all dog owners.

In the final analysis, the TF is continuing to identify the wide range of opportunities available for improving the performance of working dogs. Large established organizations that can breed large numbers of dogs each year may be in a better position to make use of selective breeding, but smaller organizations and individual breeders stand to achieve larger gains through enhanced techniques for identifying individual dogs with high potential.

Although the specific applications being used by those involved vary across the country, collectively, the efforts of the TF will continue to play a critical role in the future development of a domestic breeding program that is needed to produce detection dogs. The AKC is also helping via their website which posts articles, webinars, videos, and reports about the work of TF in the on-going efforts of the Patriotic Puppy Program.

More information is also available at the AKC Government Relations Action Center and at http://www.akc.org/edc . Melissa Ferrell is the DDTF Program Manager: 919-816-3720.

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