



K9 Teams Press “Paws” on Healthcare Violence and Crime

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Whether de-escalating potentially violent scenarios, managing crowd control, or simply acting as a visual deterrent, highly trained K9 security teams are playing an important role at U.S. hospitals and medical centers. K9 teams are prevalent in some sectors but their role in healthcare is relatively new and exciting.

The healthcare sector’s initial reluctance to consider a K9 team as part of its security plan was, in part, due to a perception of aggressive dogs that attack and bite people—not a particularly good match for the warm and nurturing

environment healthcare organizations foster. However, the reality is that K9 teams are highly trained and responsive and may serve as a calming presence, as well as a strong visible and psychological deterrent against negative behavior.

In a healthcare facility, aggressive behavior is commonplace. The aggressive and potentially violent patient is not looked upon as a criminal, however, but as a patient who needs help. This makes it even more important to find ways to de-escalate and calm patients and visitors while deterring unwanted aggressive behavior.

A health system with facilities in several U.S. states along the East Coast cares for an underserved community in need of quality medical care. The system provides services to a low-income population, including correctional and forensic patients. The health system offers many programs for the community such as emergency services, drug rehabilitation, community housing, and behavioral health and psychiatric services.

The health system's facilities are in high-crime neighborhoods, and this environment presents unique security and life safety challenges for patients, staff, and visitors. When the facility's security director began experiencing quality issues with the organization's security vendor, and the local police department began backing away from providing off-duty officers, he initiated a search for a proactive team approach.

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The healthcare organization secured a contract for private security. One of the first priorities was to reset the security program to coincide with the mission and vision of the health system. Part of this reset was the addition of a K9 team. Duties of the K9 team—comprising an armed security professional and a trained K9—included foot and vehicle patrols of the common or public areas, parking areas, and perimeter; unattended package checks; and response to all security-related code calls to provide an over-watch position. Additionally, the unit acts as a visible deterrent by patrolling the emergency department and other high traffic and high incident areas.

After an extensive sourcing process to select a handler with a healthcare, security, and law enforcement background, a highly trained and experienced

security officer and partner K9—Raven—were hired. The team was introduced to hospital staff during two weeks of orientation to allow staff to get to know and become comfortable with the team. Staff were trained on the team's role and expectations, and these interactions abated many fears and apprehensions from the staff.

The knowledge that a professionally trained, nationally certified K9 team and security professionals are onsite may make employees and visitors feel more secure. While the K9 is highly trained and vigilant, he also provides a comforting and friendly presence for visitors and staff. The team acts as a public relations tool and has helped increase retention of the facility's nursing staff.

The K9 team is front and center in conflict resolution. For example, recently an aunt and her niece became combative with each other and the K9 team defused the situation by simply walking into the room. In another example, the hospital went into partial lockdown with the arrival of two shooting victims related to gang violence. Family members were aggressively threatening retaliation, but the K9 team was a deterring factor in keeping hospital disruption to a minimum. Upon arrival of the team, the crowd immediately dispersed, and the threats ceased.

Recently, the K9 team observed an individual walk into the parking garage and peer into parked cars. After the team made its presence known, the individual quickly retreated and no cars were broken into. The use of this K9, which patrols across the system's medical campuses, acts as a constant deterrent. Since the arrival of the K9 unit, the healthcare organization has had no car break-ins and violent acts have been reduced by 75 percent.

Risk/Cost Assessment and K9

When determining whether a K9 team is appropriate for a specific healthcare environment, the first step is determining what problems you are trying to solve and what tools provide the best solution. Like video surveillance, security officers, protective barriers, visitor management, access control protocols, robotics, and analytics, K9 teams are not an entire security solution, but a component of the overall program. Consider the pros and cons of using a K9 team as you would any other component of your program.

K9 teams can effectively deter criminal activity and violence. The psychological deterrent the team has is arguably much greater than an average security officer—and potentially more impactful than an armed police officer. With the right team and relationship building, adding a K9 team can increase the feeling of safety for your staff, patients, and visitors. The team can also be used in community outreach and public relations projects, enhancing the hospital's brand.

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But it does come at a cost. A K9 team is much more expensive than hiring a security officer or using off-duty law enforcement. Those costs include higher wages for the officer/handler, the initial cost of the K9, and ongoing costs for care, maintenance, housing, training, and certifications. For those hospitals that decide to hire a K9 team, the initial investment is quite expensive and hard to absorb if you hire the wrong handler or something happens to the K9. Many are looking to partner with a company that can provide these services at a flat rate, which also takes on the risks and tasks most hospitals are not prepared for or knowledgeable of.

Another consideration includes the arming level of the officer/handler. Many organizations decide to arm the officer with a firearm for the protection of the team, which adds additional training and certification responsibilities requirements.

Then consider the healthcare environment and the impact the team may have in specific areas. Even with the best care, dogs have dandruff which may cause an allergic reaction. K9 teams do not usually patrol patient care areas, especially critical care and behavioral health units. They stay primarily in public areas and the exterior unless dispatched to an incident. Having the infection prevention team involved in K9 team plans is a must.

K9 Schedule

Once an organization decides to move forward with a K9 team, the next step is determining the size of the program. Do you need a team 24/7 or just 40 hours per week on an adjustable schedule? An analysis of the number of violent and criminal events and the timing of these events can help decide the level of K9 support needed. A good rule of thumb is to start with one team and decide whether to expand the program after seeing the results.

K9 Comfort

The K9 and officer are responsible for protecting each other, as well as hospital staff, which is why K9 officers are typically armed. In addition, the K9 team should have a special vehicle to transport the K9, have a location for breaks, and serve as an additional deterrent by advertising the presence of the team.

Along with the considerations listed earlier, there are other items for a health system or hospital to consider. Where will the dog go to the bathroom? Is there a rest area for the dog in the hospital? Are there areas within the facility the team should not enter? These types of details need to be ironed out before bringing the K9 into the facility.

K9 Orientation

The current security team and hospital staff need to be trained on how to interact with the K9 team and meet its expectations. Bring the handler in to get to know the hospital staff for about a week before bringing in the K9. Then, allow an additional week for the team to acclimate to the environment. This has historically worked well in introducing the team and making the program a success.

Training

Monthly, quarterly, and annual training is required for K9 teams. The K9 officer must meet all of the same requirements demanded of other security professionals, in addition to K9 and armed requirements.

K9 teams need special training to be effective in a healthcare setting. They must be tolerant of sudden, loud noises; comfortable in crowded rooms; and be able to stay focused in a high-distraction, high traffic environment. They need to be able to discern threatening versus non-threatening situations and be able to blend into their role as part of the security program. K9 teams must also understand the environment where patient care is provided.

Murphy's Law

What is the plan when the handler goes on vacation or if the K9 gets sick or injured? Continuity planning can be difficult if you have only one team. This is one of the significant challenges for in-house programs because you can be without a team if something happens to the K9. A partnership with a security partner eliminates most of the liability, ensures continual training, and provides replacement dogs and K9 officers if the need arises.

If you are considering adding this component to your security program consider all your options, risks, and liabilities and who you can partner with. Reach out to those facilities that have programs in place and learn from their mistakes.

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