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Art Martori

Officer John Lafontaine stepped out of his patrol car to approach the large, muscular man he suspected of harassing residents in a run-down neighborhood near 64th Street and Broadway Road. "Hey!" Lafontaine said sharply. "Step over here."

[View police dog slideshow.](#)

The man, whose bulky torso was barely contained by a sleeveless T-shirt, complied quickly. As he was questioned, the man glanced warily toward Lafontaine's patrol vehicle, where fierce barking resonated from the back seat.

The truck rocked from side to side as Leon, a Mesa police service dog, paced in his air-conditioned kennel within the vehicle.

"It's a huge deterrent," Lafontaine said minutes later. Several Mesa police patrol units had arrived to secure the area, allowing Lafontaine and Leon to re-sume their patrol.

The pair were among four K-9 units on Mesa streets one night about a month ago. The Mesa Police Department has seven officers who work with 11 service dogs.

Police K-9 units are used across the East Valley — from the Gila River Indian Community, which has about 12,000 residents and employs three K-9 units, to Scottsdale, which employs six service dogs to maintain public safety for more than 220,000 residents.

Service dogs help police maintain public safety

PURSUIT DRILL: Spike, a Scottsdale K-9 police dog, chases officer Dan Blackwell during a simulation at Coronado High School.



Police representatives from around the Valley said the dogs, whether they are trained for a single or dual purpose, easily pay for themselves.

Spike, a Belgian Malinois trained in both patrol and drug-sniffing, helped seize \$950,000 in cash in July, Scottsdale police said.



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Officer Owen Keefe, a dog handler, said Spike was deployed at Scottsdale Airpark after federal and local law enforcement agencies received a tip that the Learjet of a suspected drug smuggler would be at the airport.

Spike detected the odor of narcotics in one of the plane's compartments, which also held \$950,000.

The suspect couldn't account for the money, and police seized it.

"There's a case where the dog paid for himself 100 times over," Keefe said.

Police dogs in Scottsdale save suspects' lives too, Keefe said. He said he was off-duty in July when a call came in from Mesa police, who had located a stolen vehicle. But the suspect was still inside the car and had a gun in his lap.

Keefe and his Belgian Malinois, Nitro, responded to the call. Keefe said police used tear gas on the suspect, who still refused to comply with police instructions. Police feared the suspect might still be armed and was attempting a "suicide by cop," Keefe said.

Nitro took down the suspect with a bite to his arm and groin.

"The dog prevented an escalating situation," Keefe said. "(The suspect) can recover from the bites. That was a great example of the dog stopping it from going to lethal force."

More police dogs would improve public safety for Mesa's population of about 450,000 residents, officers said. The dogs would be more effective, officers said, if they were allowed to specialize in an area of law enforcement.

Two of the Mesa department's 11 dogs handle bomb and drug detection exclusively. Two more have been cross-trained to sniff for bombs or drugs, but they're also used on patrol.

Police said it can be tough for the dog to handle patrol work and respond in the same day to calls for bomb or narcotics detection.

For example, a dog trained in patrol work might not be ideal for bomb-sniffing, especially when it had just been asked to perform a task that required a high level of aggression, such as taking down a suspect.

Mesa Police Chief George Gascón, who was appointed in July, said he wants to move away from using police dogs for a variety of services, and instead allow them to focus on a particular set of duties.

"Cross-trained dogs are not a good thing," he said. "Eventually, we'll get away from that."

Gascón said the department would soon get one more narcotics dog, which typically costs about \$8,000. He said bolstering the K-9 unit is one priority among many as he settles into his new job.

Jim Watson, spokesman for the North American Police Work Dog Association, said it would be impossible to count the total number of police dogs working in the U.S.

"There is no accurate number out there," he said.

Mesa police buy most of their service dogs from Adelhorst International, a California-based business that trains German shepherds and Belgian Malinois for police agencies across the country. David Reaver, founder and director of Adelhorst, said demand for service dogs has risen since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It's actually worldwide," Reaver said. "The competition for the dogs has become keener."

Reaver said he now has to wait in line with police agencies from countries such as Italy and Japan when he attempts to purchase Belgian Malinois from kennels in Europe.

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Despite Mesa police objections to using cross-trained dogs, Reaver said these animals can do just as good a job as single-purpose dogs. He added that cross-trained dogs also are a better value.

"When a dog has the aptitude to be a dual-purpose dog, you get more out of the dog," he said.

Russell Hess, executive director of the United States Police Canine Association, said the use of single-purpose dogs versus dual-purpose dogs has been an ongoing debate within law enforcement circles.

Many U.S. police agencies use dogs specifically for bomb and drug detection, he said. But others, the Secret Service for instance, use dogs for several purposes.

"It depends on the environment you want (the service dog) to work in," Hess said.

Hess said patrol dogs are trained to protect their handlers and could be distracted when they sniff for bombs or drugs in a large crowd, where they might perceive the jostling people as threats to the police officer.

Gilbert police officer Greg Thomas said one of the most memorable incidents he's experienced as a K-9 handler falls under the category of a "dumb criminal story."

He said someone tried to break into Gilbert's police headquarters in 2001.

"He was trying to get into the police evidence facility," Thomas said. "I guess if you're a criminal, there's all kinds of cool stuff — guns, dope."

But an officer entered the facility just as the would-be thief tried to break in, Thomas said. The thief fled, so Thomas turned loose his Belgian Malinois, Otto, who is now retired.

Otto found the man behind a trash container and dragged him out, Thomas said.

Service dogs aren't protected by the same laws as human officers, but harming a police dog is still a felony.

Mesa police said none of their dogs have died in the line of duty. But Lafontaine's last dog, Ully, a German shepherd, had to be euthanized in July.

Ully was used as model for a memorial statue at Wesley Bolin Plaza in Phoenix that was dedicated to the 17 Arizona police dogs that have died in the line of duty since 1972.

See for yourself

WHAT: It's the Olympics of the service dog world: The 2007 Desert Dog Regional Police K-9 Trials. Service dogs from various state and federal agencies compete in a series of field exercises.

WHEN: April 14-15

WHERE: Scottsdale Municipal Stadium, 7408 E. Osborn Road

INFORMATION: www.desertdogk9trials.com

Service dog commands

Police service dogs are often trained to understand commands in several languages. While police are able to direct the dog using commands in English, they also give instructions in German, French and Dutch. These are a few of the commands that service dogs understand:

HEEL: "fuss" (German), "au pied" (French), "volg" or "rechts" (Dutch)

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BUILDING SEARCH: "voran" or "revier" (German), "cherche" (French), "revieren" (Dutch)

NARCOTICS: "rauschgift" (German), "drogue" (French)

Source: The University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

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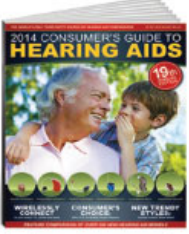
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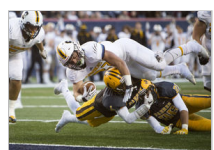
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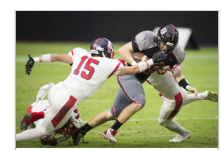
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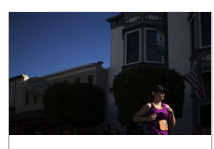
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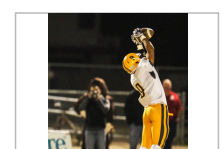
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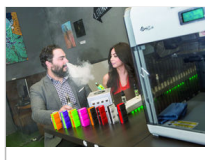


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