TO:       HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM:     CITY MANAGER     DEPARTMENT:     POLICE

DATE:     JANUARY 10, 2005     CMR:113:05

SUBJECT:  REVIEW OF THE POLICE DEPARTMENT’S CANINE PROGRAM

This is an informational report and no Council action is required.

BACKGROUND

Last September, there were a number of news stories regarding an incident involving Mountain View’s canine unit. As a result of these stories, questions have been raised regarding the safety and effectiveness of police canine programs in general. The purpose of this report is to provide the City Council with information regarding the history, training, capabilities and policies of the Palo Alto Police Department’s canine program.

DISCUSSION

The Police Department’s canine program was developed in 1982 with two dogs. Over the past 22 years, there have been a total of 14 different dogs. The Department currently has four canine teams assigned to evening and night shifts. All of the dogs used by the Department have been purebred German Shepherds imported from Europe by Witmer-Tyson Imports of Menlo Park. At the time of purchase, each dog is Shutzhund certified, an international recognition of extensive training in obedience, tracking and protection.

Canine Handlers/Training – An officer interested in becoming a canine handler must complete a selection process involving interviews with supervisory and management staff, as well as a review of their work history and personnel files. Prospective handlers must also successfully pass a psychological examination to insure they are properly suited to be a canine handler. Finally, a home inspection is conducted to ensure the officer’s residence is suitable and safe to house the dog.

Once a certified dog has been purchased and a suitable officer is selected, the two form a team that will work together for up to eight years depending on the health of the dog. Before the team starts working patrol together, they must successfully complete a California Commission on Peace Officers’ Standards and Training (POST)-approved 160-hour Basic Canine Handler training course. The officer and the dog train as a team in the areas of obedience (on and off leash), protection,
searches (indoors and outdoors) and high-risk traffic stops. After completion of the basic course, all canine teams are required to attend bi-weekly training sessions in order to maintain their high level of proficiency. Finally, all canine teams are required to be evaluated by an outside evaluator on an annual basis to maintain their Commission on Peace Officers’ Standards and Training certification.

In addition to the basic canine certification, police dogs can also be trained and certified in drug detection. The Police Department has had a total of three dogs cross-trained in drug detection over the length of the program. Currently, there is one drug detection dog in the Department. The additional training for the drug detection canine certification consists of an additional 120-hour POST course and annual recertification.

The handler is responsible for providing care, feeding and grooming of the dog seven days a week. Handlers keep their dogs at home where they have become family pets.

Canine handlers drive a specially designed patrol vehicle. These vehicles have had the rear seats removed and a platform installed to better accommodate the dog. The vehicles have also had metal screens installed over the rear side windows to allow the handler to lower the windows for ventilation without allowing people to reach into the vehicle or the dog to exit the vehicle. All canine vehicles are marked as “K-9” with distinctive caution signs. While police canines are trained not to deploy on their own, they are trained to be protective of their handler and their patrol vehicle. All canine vehicles are also equipped with a remote door release feature that allows the handler to remotely open the rear door if he/she wishes to summon the dog after having exited the vehicle. Unless the dog observes that the handler is under attack, the dog will not exit the vehicle even after the door has been opened remotely until the handler verbally calls for the dog to exit the vehicle.

Use of Canines – Canines respond to in-progress calls such as burglaries, prowlers, robberies and foot pursuits. They are used to search open areas such as fields, backyards and parking lots for suspects and evidence. They are also be used to search buildings such as large businesses and residences for individuals suspected or known to be hiding inside. Because of the dog’s advanced tracking abilities, one canine team can search a large commercial building, house or a number of backyards for a suspect in a fraction of the time it would take officers. If a canine team has searched a backyard or a building without locating a suspect, there is an extremely high probability there is no suspect in the specific area. The same cannot be said with the same level of confidence when the search is conducted only using officers.

When a police canine team is deployed to search for a suspect that has fled a crime scene or is reported to be inside a structure, the handler will take all the circumstances into consideration to determine if the search will be conducted on or off leash. The time of day, number of people in the area, type of suspected criminal activity and age of the suspect are all taken into account. When there is a specific location the officers believe the suspect may be hiding or before searching a
building with a possible hidden suspect, the officers give a verbal warning that they are about to release the dog and if the suspect does not surrender, he/she is subject to being bitten by the dog. This warning is given multiple times, and depending upon the area being searched, may be given over the public address system of the patrol car from multiple locations. Most suspects will surrender once they hear that a canine is on the premises.

When a subject is suspected to be in a specific area or structure, responding patrol units will establish a perimeter to contain the suspect. After the proper warnings have been given regarding the use of the police dog and the suspect chooses to ignore these warnings, the police canine team will begin their search. Once the dog locates the suspect, the dog is trained to “bark and hold” which alerts the handler of the suspect’s location. If the suspect does not run or attack the dog or the handler, the dog will take no further action. However, if it is still unsafe for the officers to approach the suspect, the handler may release the dog to apprehend the suspect. The dog will bite and hold the suspect until he gives up and complies with the officer’s commands. As soon as the suspect complies or is no longer considered a threat, the handler will order the dog to release the suspect. All police dogs are trained to immediately release a suspect upon command of the handler.

All subjects bitten by police canines are taken to Stanford Hospital for treatment and evaluation prior to being booked into jail. All incidents of canine bites are documented in a crime report, as well as a supervisor’s administrative use of force investigation. The canine supervisor, the manager of the canine program, the Patrol Captain and the Chief of Police review all of these investigations.

The majority of day-to-day canine deployments do not result in dog bites. Staff reviewed all canine bite incidents for the last three years. A total of thirteen have occurred. Of the 13 bites, four involved Whites, five involved African-Americans, three involved Hispanics and one involved a Pacific Islander. The following is a short description of the circumstances in each incident:

• Burglary suspect believed to be inside of store at 1:30 a.m. The dog was deployed after the suspect failed to surrender after being ordered to exit the building and after an announcement was made that the dog would be sent in unless he came out. (Hispanic)
• Multi-agency search warrant for parolee/felon-at-large. Dog was deployed after the suspect ran from officers and refused to surrender. (White)
• Suspect who was prowling in a resident’s backyard at 1:30 a.m. failed to surrender after being ordered to do so and after a warning the dog would be released. (African-American)
• Suspect who had stolen a vehicle fled from the officers. Suspect pulled into a driveway of a home and was ordered to stop. After a foot pursuit through several yards, the dog was deployed. (African-American)
• Suspect in a theft from a store downtown fled from police into an adjacent residential area. After a foot pursuit through several yards, suspect was located hiding in some bushes. The suspect was ordered to come out and surrender or the dog would be deployed. The suspect refused to come out. (Pacific Islander)
• Suspect in drunk driving case ran from officers. After a lengthy foot pursuit, the dog was deployed after suspect refused to surrender. (African-American)

• Robbery suspect armed with a knife fled on foot when officers attempted to arrest him. After a five-hour search, the suspect was located in some bushes. He refused to surrender after being ordered to and after he was told the dog would be deployed. (African-American)

• Suspect involved in a fight fled from the officers and was located hiding in the bushes. The suspect was ordered to surrender and warned that the dog would be deployed. The suspect refused to surrender. (White)

• During assistance provided to the Menlo Park Police Department with the arrest of suspects in a theft case, the suspects fled and began running through yards. One suspect surrendered. The other hid in some thick ivy. He was ordered to surrender and warned that the dog would be deployed if he didn’t. He refused to surrender. (African-American)

• Suspects observed breaking into a car fled when officers arrived. One suspect surrendered and the other continued running after being ordered to stop. (Hispanic)

• Burglary suspect ran out of the store when the officers arrived and was subsequently found hiding in the yard of an adjacent residence. He ignored repeated commands to surrender and the dog was deployed. (Hispanic)

• Suspect in a drunk driving case ran from the officer. After refusing commands to stop, the dog was deployed. (White)

• Two suspects were beating a subject. The suspects were ordered to stop, but ignored the officers. The dog was deployed and was able to subdue one suspect and the other immediately surrendered. (White)

Community Outreach

While much of the focus of canine programs is placed on the apprehension and injury to suspects, the Palo Alto Police canine program has enjoyed strong involvement with the community over the years. The dogs and their handlers have provided demonstrations for local Police and Fire Shows, Citizens Academy classes, Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, countless school programs and police building tours. As a result of this public outreach, earlier this year the Cub and Girl Scouts at Addison Elementary School held a “Dog-a-Thon” to raise money for the purchase of ballistic vests for the police dogs. The children were able to raise over $800. Staff is in the process of purchasing these vests that will greatly enhance the safety of the dogs.

Beginning in January 2005, staff will begin using the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system to track the many activities of the canine teams. Staff will be able to list in detail the number of times the teams are used for searches, community events and arrests. This detailed analysis will give a better understanding of the wide range of activities and flexibility of the canine program and its value to the community.