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Electronic Detection / Victim Support K9 Program

Program Overview

The Somerville Police Department (SPD) proposes the establishment of a dual-purpose Electronic Detection (EDD) and Victim Support K9 Program. The program's mission is to enhance SPD's ability to investigate Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) cases and provide trauma-informed support to victims of crime, particularly during forensic interviews and disclosures of sexual assault or exploitation.

This initiative strengthens SPD's commitment to progressive, victim-centered policing and community engagement while ensuring all operations remain within the scope of criminal investigations.

Primary Objectives

1. Victim Support

The K9's primary function will be to provide emotional support to victims and witnesses, especially children, during forensic interviews, statements, and court proceedings. Empirical studies demonstrate significant improvements in disclosure rates and reductions in anxiety when a comfort K9 is present during trauma-related interviews, resulting in disclosures that have a higher potential for prosecution.

2. Community Trust Building

The K9 Team will participate in community events, and public outreach initiatives, reinforcing SPD's reputation for compassionate, community-oriented service.

3. Investigative Capability

The K9 will be trained to detect the unique odor of electronic storage devices such as SD cards, hard drives, and cell phones. This skill is particularly critical in Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and child exploitation investigations, where electronic evidence is often hidden or intentionally concealed. Having this capability in-house will allow SPD to respond more efficiently and support regional task forces when appropriate.

Why CSAM Investigations Are Critical to Child Protection

Investigations involving CSAM are not victimless crimes. Each image or video represents the documentation of an actual sexual assault against a child, and research demonstrates that many CSAM offenders are also hands-on abusers. In a federal study known as The Butner Study Redux, Bourke and

Hernandez (2009) found that **85% of convicted CSAM offenders later admitted to sexually abusing a child** when participating in comprehensive treatment and polygraph testing¹. This finding demonstrates that digital evidence recovery is not merely about prosecuting possession cases, it can directly lead to the identification and protection of living victims. Establishing an Electronic Detection K9 within SPD will significantly strengthen the department's capacity to locate hidden media and intervene before further harm occurs.

Regional Coordination

- **No Memorandum of Understanding Requirement:** The US Secret Service (USSS) issues the dog to the department with no MOU requirement. All external deployments will remain at SPD's discretion. The K9 Team will not be subject to mandatory call-outs or outside operational control. **The K9 team will not be used for any immigration enforcement activities.**
- **MA State Police ICAC Unit** currently operates one EDD K9 and is acquiring a second. SPD's K9 would fill a local and regional gap, increasing responsiveness and investigative efficiency.
- **Secret Service (Boston Field Office)** may request occasional support for cases involving electronic evidence.

Training & Certification

- **Training Location:** U.S. Secret Service National Computer Forensics Institute (NCFI), Alabama.
- **Initial Certification:** Provided and funded by the U.S. Secret Service.

¹ Bourke, M. L., & Hernandez, A. E. (2009). *The Butner Study Redux: A report of the incidence of hands-on child victimization by child pornography offenders*. *Journal of Family Violence*, 24(3), 183–191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-008-9219-y>