

Lexington Fire Department Comfort K9 Program Policy



Purpose

Fire personnel are subject to long working hours, shift work, sporadic high-intensity situations, strong emotional involvement and exposure to extreme human suffering. These factors can impose undue stress, anxiety and strain on fire personnel. The need for behavioral health services continues to grow in the department. One way to address these concerns is through the use of comfort canines.

Scope

The Lexington Fire Department (LFD) has endorsed the use of certified comfort K9(s) within the department.

The Program Manager will be assigned by the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) to serve as the head of the program. The LFD Fire Chief (or designee) will receive regular updates on the program by the Program Manager.

Expectations

The K9(s) will be trained and certified as fire department working comfort K9(s) to provide comfort and emotional support to all individuals they meet - within the department, the organization and the community. Clinical evidence has shown that the presence of a comfort K9 can reduce anxiety, stress, and blood pressure for populations experiencing trauma. Comfort K9s are used extensively in fire stations, EMS stations, court houses, and hospitals for this purpose.

In addition to use as emotional support, the K9(s) can be used for approved community engagement and education efforts.

Designated Handlers

All K9(s) will have a designated primary and two secondary handlers approved by the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) who will be City of Lexington Fire Department employees to ensure consistent care and accountability. The secondary handlers will be available as needed to provide for consistency in training.

The designated handlers will continue all necessary training and provide opportunities for the LFD employees, the organization and the community to see and interact with the dogs.

Training

Via a contract, an approved training organization will provide all necessary training to the primary and secondary handlers, either at their facility or one of the LFD stations at a cost agreed upon by the LFD and the training organization for the duration of the K9(s) life. The entire department will receive abbreviated training, at a cost agreed upon by the LFD and training organization, by the trainer. If the primary handler conducts the abbreviated training, there will be no additional cost.

- K9(s) shall be trained to follow voice commands (including directing away from off-limit areas and correcting unwarranted behavior) and hand signals to return to the handlers who will be vigilant in reinforcing these trained commands.

- K9(s) shall be trained to recognize the station alert tones and will return to their kennel on their own accord until they are released by station personnel.
- Designated handlers will continue the K9(s) training until the K9 becomes of age, before one year old, at which time the handler will return to an approved credentialing organization to take the test to become a Certified Therapy Dog Team.
- Designated handlers will continue to use all voice commands and hand signals within the dogs training, while also taking them on training outings to make sure they maintain their knowledge and abilities.
- All training sessions or community visits will be documented in a training log. Each designated handler will aim to perform at least an hour of training per week.
- Every two years designated handlers and their K9 will participate in recertification test for their Fire Department Working Therapy Dog certification.
- The K9s shall not be asked to perform tasks they are not trained in.

Daily Care & Treatment

The authority and responsibility of 24/7 daily care and treatment of the K9(s) will rest with the designated handlers.

- K9(s) will be fed approved dog food once in the morning and once in the evening by a designated handler. K9(s) will not be fed table scraps or dog food/treats that aren't approved by the designated handlers. Personal food shouldn't be left unattended.
- Designated handlers will conduct an inspection of the K9 to check for medical or physical issues.
- Designated handlers will ensure the K9 receives medical treatment, if necessary. Copies of medical records, vaccinations and veterinary visits will be filed with the LFD and Risk Management.

On-Duty Care & Treatment

The authority and responsibility of on-duty care and treatment of the K9(s) will rest with the designated handlers.

- While on duty in public view, K9(s) shall be on-lead (leashed) and designated as a comfort K9 or fire department dog by their collar or vest.
- When on department property, K9(s) will have access to the offices, classrooms and living areas with the following exceptions:
 - K9(s) shall not be permitted on the furniture in the station (ex. couches and beds). This is to reduce the likelihood of contaminating the fabrics with allergens.
 - The kitchen and dining areas will be off-limits during mealtimes.
 - The locker rooms and bathrooms are off-limits at all times.
 - K9(s) shall not be allowed onto any fire apparatus unless on-lead and accompanied by a designated handler.
 - The handlers will utilize an e-collar on the K9 while training.
 - If the K9 is in the parking lot at the fire station, it must be on-lead with a designated handler.

- If the bay doors are closed, the K9 will be permitted to being off-lead (unleashed).
- The K9 should be taken for a walk on-lead no less than two times during an eight-hour period.
- No personal pets will be permitted inside the stations when the K9 is on duty.
- The designated handlers will ensure the K9 has appropriate bathroom breaks throughout the course of the day.
- City vehicles issued to designated handlers must have signage notating a K9 is on board. A warning system that will alert designated handlers if the temperature rises in the car while the K9 is inside, unattended, shall be installed into vehicles.
- An appropriate-sized kennel shall be available at Station 1 for the K9. Water will be made available for the dog while being kenneled. The dog may not be kenneled longer than four hours without a break, except for cases of emergency.
- The Program Manager/Primary Handler has discretion regarding working hours for the K9.

Off-Duty Care & Treatment

The authority and responsibility of off-duty care and treatment of the K9(s) will rest with the designated handlers.

- When the K9(s) aren't on duty, the K9(s) shall reside at the home of their primary handler.
- The primary handler shall provide living quarters that are clean, sanitary and healthy. A fenced yard/area and secure outdoor area are required as well.
- If the primary handler must leave the K9 in the care of their family, the primary handler will provide them with contact numbers for the secondary handlers. In the case of an emergency and the primary handler cannot be reached, family members will call the secondary handlers. If a secondary handler cannot be reached, the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) shall be notified.
- The primary handler is responsible for arranging care and housing if away for an extended period of time (and their family is unable to care for the K9).

Transportation

When on-duty, K9(s) shall not be allowed to ride in any department vehicles unless a proper safety restraint is utilized and accompanied by a designated handler.

Designated handlers may use modified department issued vehicles (equipped with approved transportation restraints) for transporting the K9(s).

To transport K9(s) in personal vehicles, designated handlers must have approved transportation restraints.

Behavior

In the event the K9 becomes destructive or aggressive, the designated handler shall be notified immediately to remove the K9 from the scene. If aggressive behavior persists, the designated

handlers will confer with a training organization (preferably the one that trained the K9) to develop a course of action to address the issue.

If the K9 causes harm to a person, Risk Management will be contacted and an incident report will be filed.

Disciplinary action will be taken against any City of Lexington employee that engages in abuse or neglect of the K9(s).

Ownership

K9(s) shall be the property of the City of Lexington. Subject to North Carolina law and the limitations as hereinafter set forth, if the LFD determines that the program cannot continue, the primary handler shall have the first right to consult with the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) and offer to purchase the K9(s) from the City of Lexington at the purchase price as hereinafter set forth. In default thereof, the secondary handlers shall have the right to consult with the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) and offer to purchase the K9(s) from the City of Lexington at the purchase price as hereinafter set forth. The purchase price shall be determined by the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) and shall be based on the value of the remaining number of years of serviceability. Notwithstanding anything here to the contrary, the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) will have the absolute discretion to determine whether or not to sell the K9(s) to the primary handler and/or the secondary handlers as the case may be or whether the City shall retain ownership of the K9(s).

If the primary handler is involuntarily terminated from employment or chooses to no longer participate in the K9 program while employed with the department, the LFD shall place the K9(s) with a secondary handler or a new qualified handler. Subject to North Carolina law and the limitations as hereinafter set forth, if the primary handler voluntarily leaves employment with the department, and desires to keep the K9(s), the primary handler shall have the right to consult with the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) and offer to purchase the K9(s) from the City of Lexington at the purchase price as hereinafter set forth. The purchase price shall be determined by the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) and shall be based on the value of the remaining number of years of serviceability. Notwithstanding anything here to the contrary, the LFD Fire Chief (or designee) will have the absolute discretion to determine whether or not to sell the K9(s) to the primary handler at the established purchase price or whether the City shall retain ownership of the K9(s).

Insurance

The City of Lexington shall carry liability insurance for the duration of K9(s) service career. This should cover biting or harming any individual while acting in the capacity of a comfort K9 as they are trained and certified. Upon transfer of ownership of the K9, the owner will become responsible for the insurance of the K9.

Retirement

K9(s) will be evaluated at the age of 5 and a determination as to continue working as a comfort K9 or to be retired will be made by Program Manager and LFD Fire Chief (or designee) in

partnership with the approved training organizations trainers (preferably the organization that trained the K9). At the age of 8, the K9 will retire.

Upon retirement, the K9 shall be deemed surplus property, and the primary handler shall be given the first option to purchase the K9 at a price to be established by the LFD Fire Chief (or designee).

In default thereof, the secondary handlers shall be granted an option to purchase the K9(s) at a price to be established by the LFD Fire Chief (or designee).

Supplies, Toys & Grooming

The K9(s) designated handlers are not responsible for any supplies.

All approved dog food and treats shall be provided by the Lexington Fire Department and/or a future non-profit foundation created to support and benefit the City of Lexington animal units throughout the K9(s) service career.

All necessary leads, leashes, crates, harnesses, and collars as well as ancillary supplies such as waste bags shall be provided by the Lexington Fire Department and/or a future non-profit foundation created to support and benefit the City of Lexington animal units throughout the K9(s) service career.

K9(s) will receive monthly grooming at an approved dog groomer. Grooming costs will be paid by the Lexington Fire Department and/or a future non-profit foundation created to support and benefit the City of Lexington animal units throughout the K9(s) service career.

Any toys provided by the Lexington Fire Department and/or a future non-profit foundation created to support and benefit the City of Lexington animal units should make minimum noise so it doesn't distract staff. Toys that are easy to destroy or tear should be avoided to reduce cleaning.

Veterinary Care

The primary veterinary care of the K9 will be determined by the Primary Manager and LFD Chief (or designee).

In the event the K9 needs immediate or emergency medical care due to sickness or injury any emergency vet can be utilized at the best interest of the K9, and financial responsibility will fall to the City of Lexington.

In the event of a traumatic injury or serious illness that requires an end-of-life decision to be made, the final decision will be made by the Program Manager, primary and secondary handlers.

Requesting the K9(s)

As stated under expectations the K9(s) will provide emotional support to those within the fire department. Additionally, the K9(s) are available to make visits to other City of Lexington departments and be used for approved community engagement and education efforts.

To request a visit from the K9(s), the Program Manager should be contacted to schedule. The Program Manager will use discretion to determine if and when the K9 will visit.

It will be the responsibility of the designated handlers to educate the employees and public when they can or cannot interact with the comfort K9.

Emotional/ Peer Support

K9(s) can be requested for any Peer Support debriefing or defusing. The Program Manager should be contacted to schedule and will determine if K9 will attend.

If the K9 is causing more of a distraction and being a hinderance in any way they are to be removed from the peer support event.

Education/ Community Events

K9(s) can be requested for education purposes or for community events. Whether the event is appropriate for a K9 is at the discretion of the Program Manager. K9(s) can be taken to outdoor events by primary or secondary handlers, without request.

- To request a K9 for an educational event, an educator should contact the LFD Fire Chief (or designee).
- The LFD Fire Chief (or designee) will contact the handler of the dog most appropriate for the specific event.
- To request a K9 for a community event the request should be sent through the LFD Fire Chief (or designee).
- The LFD Fire Chief (or designee) will contact the handler of the dog most appropriate for the specific event.
- In both cases, the Program Manager and primary handler will determine if the K9 will attend.

Miscellaneous

It's suggested that all grooming and veterinary visits are completed during the designated handlers shift hours.

All exterior doors will have a sign alerting visitors of a comfort K9 being on the property at Station 1.

*Policy is effective immediately upon approval by the City of Lexington City Council.