

# Keeping the Peace

## Solace, Security All in a Day's Work for UTMC K9 Force

As a Level 1 Trauma Center and busy academic medical facility, the accomplished staff of the University of Tennessee Medical Center is prepared to handle just about any event from gang-related gun violence and emergency surgery to targeted cancer treatment or a Saturday afternoon soccer fracture.

That broad spectrum of care leads to an equally broad constituency with different backgrounds, needs and behaviors. To help keep the peace – whether that means calming a scared patient or a large crowd – UTMC counts on highly trained officers weighing in around 75 pounds and standing a little more than two feet high ... when on all fours.



Ongoing training keeps Koda's skill set sharp.

UTMC was the first hospital in the state to deploy a K9 force, and the success of the program has exceeded all expectations. Brian Hitch, Director of Security, Parking and PBX for the medical center, said the program launched in June 2014. "We started with two dogs, and now we have seven," he said of the unit's growth. Today, the force includes Koda, Kimber, Knox, Khaos, King, Kolt and Kane.

The Belgian Malinois dogs undergo extensive skills training before arriving in Knoxville and then weeks of additional training with their assigned handler before starting their new job at UTMC. Hitch explained the K9s are multipurpose dogs with the ability to sniff out drugs and drug paraphernalia, apprehend, and track as needed. They also sit patiently for pets and hugs when called upon for comfort. "You must ask their handler first, just like you would any service dog," he noted, adding the dogs have the ability and intelligence to be tough when in security mode and tender when comforting a sick patient. "There's something about the dog's presence that is both intimidating and soothing at the same time," he added.

Hitch has seen that softer side many times, including when his own family member was hospitalized near the end of life. Requesting a visit from one of the K9s, Hitch watched as the dog cuddled next to his brother-in-law. "We didn't tell the dog to go over and hop up beside him; it just immediately did. It was such a sweet moment," Hitch said.

Similarly, he has seen smiles from frightened children and worried parents once a dog comes over. "It's a different image to see in the lobby of a hospital," he noted. Staff members, Hitch continued, also benefit after hard days. "They can request a dog, and we'll send one into their huddle. The dog gives such a calming feeling."

The therapeutic visits have grown tremendously since the force was first put in place. In 2014, there were a little more than 480 therapeutic visits and demonstrations. In 2017, that number exceeded 6,000.

Make no mistake, however, the dogs' primary role is to ensure the safety of staff, patients and visitors. The dogs have been highly effective in locating illegal contraband brought into the facility. In 2016, there were 844 K9 drug interdiction incidents, and security encountered more than 10,000 drugs and 1,700 drug paraphernalia. In 2013, prior to the K9 force being put in place, security encountered less than 2,500 drugs and only 147 drug paraphernalia. Hitch recalled an incident when an officer and dog walked through the Emergency Department. "Suddenly we found bags of marijuana stuffed in the corner where some visitors were getting it off their person," he said.

W. Keith Neeley, FACHE, Vice President of Facility Operations at UTMC, said violence avoidance – thwarting potentially inappropriate behavior before it even arises – is one of the most important roles of the K9 force but a difficult one to quantify. Noting the designation as a Level 1 Trauma Center, Neeley said the Emergency Department routinely sees high volumes of patients and their companions. "On a particular occasion, an organized motorcycle club had a member suffer a traumatic injury. Many members of the club were stationed in our lobby and ED area, which created concerns for staff and providers," he recalled. "The dog's presence kept them calm and kept the image of security and safety for others in the various waiting areas." He added, "Canines and handlers appear to mediate potentially volatile situations that quickly de-escalate when people see our K9 patrols."

The K9 force has also dramatically enhanced the hospital's efforts to keep guns out of the facility. UTMC security had more than 230 weapons encounters in 2016 and 2017 ... up from just 53 prior to adding the dogs. Hitch said the mere sight of the security officer and K9 partner is often enough to entice people to proactively admit to having a weapon and being directed to store it securely elsewhere.

While UTMC's experience has been overwhelmingly positive, Hitch and Neeley said adding K9s isn't a decision to be made lightly. In addition to the initial cost of the dogs, there is handler training plus ongoing monthly training, and then there's food – no small cost for such large animals, Hitch noted with a laugh. The dogs live with their handlers to enhance bonding. "We've actually purchased take-home cars for each handler," said Hitch. "These are 70- to 80-pound animals ... we got Dodge Journeys that have cages in the back so they can safely transport the dogs."

Although there are significant costs, Neeley said it's equally important to look at the bottom line benefits. "These dogs augment security by being a force-multiplier," he said. Neeley added the dogs help enhance the security force, which might otherwise require the addition of more staff. Another bonus is that clinicians feel safer, which keeps their focus on delivering the highest quality of care.

"We received an Auxiliary grant to fund our first two dogs," said Hitch. "Since then, it's become a budget line item because of the value they bring."



Officer Chase McLain and Kolt are one of seven K9 teams at UTMC.

*The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, a department of the Tennessee Hospital Association, develops and shares hospital and health system success stories and promotes best practices.*

