



United States Secret Service



Electronic Detection Dogs Equip Agencies with High-Tech Tracking Partners

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These Dogs Can Hunt...for Electronics - Inside the Electronic Detection D

U.S. Secret Service



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"Show me": A new program at the U.S. Secret Service's National Computer Forensics Institute trains dogs, handlers to find hidden electronic storage devices

Digital Forensics Detective Patrick Hartley unzipped a pouch of kibble on his belt and entered a dirty hotel room with his dog, Cache. "Let's go to work," the canine handler said, as the team began searching the room for hidden electronic storage devices.

After an initial sweep, the tail-wagging Labrador abruptly sat beside a high shelf where the television remote control was placed. Drool dripped on the floor — a sure sign for a canine officer. "Show me,"

Hartley said, prompting Cache to leap to the shelf.

A micro-SD memory card was hidden within the remote's battery compartment. The instructor overseeing the scenario opened the back of the device, revealing the tiny card. Hartley immediately praised Cache: "Good boy!" The handler from the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office in central Oregon reached into his pouch and handed his excited pup some kibble.

The search continued. Together, the pair found all 10 hidden electronic storage devices in the cluttered room, including additional memory cards and cell phones. The team was among more than a dozen dogs and handlers being trained through the new U.S. Secret Service program.

"The majority of the cases we see with our department are crimes against children. That is something that is definitely meaningful to investigate in our agency and our unit. Canine Cache will be able to help us keep kids safe," said Hartley, a first-time canine handler.

The Secret Service has a long history of working with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and local law enforcement partners. Many of the devices these highly trained dogs uncover in practice scenarios are similar to those that detectives find containing child sexual abuse material.

The dogs also unearth cell phones, hard drives, thumb drives and other electronic devices, often containing critical evidence in homicide investigations, cryptocurrency fraud and missing persons cases. Specific to the Secret Service, the dogs have been used to sweep hotel rooms and vehicles in search of hidden listening devices and cameras.

"You have to find the electronic devices in order to search those electronic devices," said Donald Witham, Special Agent in Charge of the National Computer Forensics Institute (NCFI) in Hoover, Alabama.

Since opening in 2008, more than 30,000 students have trained at NCFI. The Secret Service has used this facility's training to give back to more than 4,000 law enforcement agencies in all 50 states and five U.S. territories.





He relies on American and English Labradors, which possess a strong drive for food. The approximately five-month training harnesses this drive, rewarding the roughly two-year-old dogs with food when they find storage devices. In fact, these dogs never eat from a bowl. Their daily intake of 3-5 cups of food is provided by hand as a reward for discovering a storage device.

“All the dogs are trained on food rewards. That means the only time they eat is when they work,” Jordan said. “It keeps them motivated. It keeps them healthy. They are almost like athletes, eating small meals daily.”

This system requires handlers to train with their dogs daily. Consequently, much of the NCFI course is designed to teach handlers how to continually train their dogs once they bring them home. Last month, group training included searching a

commercial airplane and a creek, where the dogs retrieved devices underwater.

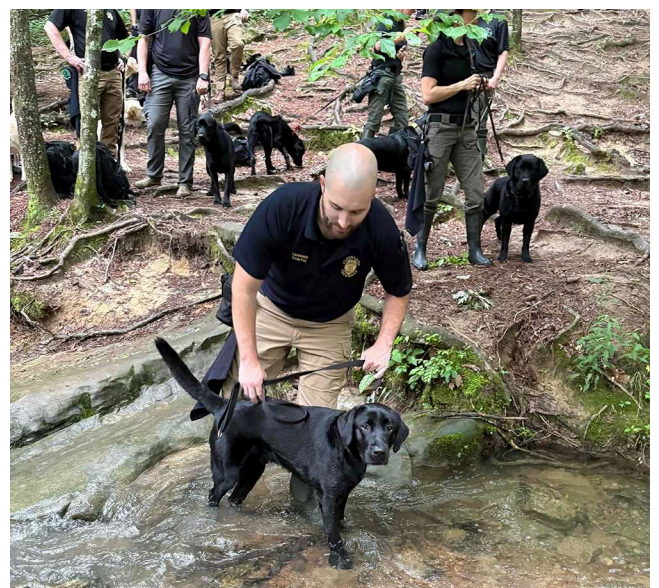
Most dogs in the program were previously trained to assist people with disabilities. For various reasons, these animals did not meet the strict service dog standards. However, Jordan builds on their prior training, teaching them to sense electronics and provide therapy to victims.

Detective Geraldine Blay-Raffo of the Seminole County Sheriff’s Department believes her dog, Storm, will provide a calming presence to her co-workers who feel stressed after dealing with challenging cases. She also thinks Storm will assist during the intense process of interrogating children and other victims of sexual assault and significant trauma.

“If we are working a difficult case and we have a victim who is very upset, she (Storm) is also trained as a comfort dog. So, she can go up to them and make them feel better,” said Blay-Raffo of Sanford, Florida.

Jordan tries to pair the dogs' personalities with their handlers. Thus, the energetic Blay-Raffo was partnered with the similarly tempered Storm. As the pair went through the training, instructors shared that the dogs are trained to detect a specific chemical that keeps electronic storage devices from overheating.

This proprietary training keeps dogs from showing interest in alarm clocks, microwave ovens, or lamps without a storage component. However, Jordan said the dogs have also found hidden cameras, AirTag location



devices, black boxes from airplane crashes and other pertinent materials.

All dogs and handlers must pass an annual certification, which is required for students prior to leaving NCFI. ESD dogs typically work until the age of 12 or longer, depending on their mobility as they age, including getting in and out of the car and navigating stairs.

“There is something special about being a canine handler ... I appreciate the fact that they (handlers) put their partner first and stash their ego away on a day-to-day basis,” said Blaise Talbott, a program manager at the Secret Service’s headquarters.

Talbott championed the EDD program for the last two years. She said the goal is to have a nationwide network of canines and handlers that the Secret Service can call upon for protective visits and investigations.

“Watching the growth between their canine partner, themselves, and their entire class is truly magical, and I am so happy that I have been able to play a part in this,” Talbott said.

The program also encourages local law enforcement agencies to share this resource with neighboring agencies, which Christopher Bragg of the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security intends to do regularly with his dog, Chip.

“We only have one (ESD) dog in the state of Mississippi,” Bragg said. “This would be a second one, and I am looking forward to getting this dog in the field.”

Talbott noted that there have already been success stories from the graduates of the Secret Service’s inaugural EDD class, including Detective Kristine Rosado and her dog, Linux. The duo from the Orlando Police Department followed up after federal agents conducted a search and discovered three hidden tablets, a cell phone, and a USB drive that agents had missed.

SAIC Witham noted that many handlers are familiar faces, returning to NCFI for the canine course after completing other cybersecurity courses. He mentioned that the Alabama-based facility trained 5,242 students nationwide last year.

He said he envisions NCFI expanding to train more than 8,000 students by 2028. This would involve broadening the course offerings to include an advanced canine detection class, among other cutting-edge training programs.

“We cannot do our protective duties without our local partners,” Witham said. “So, when we are able to provide them with a service by giving them training, devices, equipment and licenses that they may not be able to afford at their police department, it makes it a lot easier the next week if I say I am bringing in the president or the vice president.”



These protective visits often require increased staffing and overtime scheduling. Goodwill between the Secret Service and its state and local partners can make all the difference. The ESD canine program is a valued component within this exchange, Witham said.

“We get feedback every week when we get evaluations done. The overwhelming response is extremely positive. The canine program is a little more special,” Witham said. “Not only are we giving them an investigative tool to take home with them, we are also giving them a best friend.”

The Dogs of Electronic Detection





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