**Successful Fundraising for K-9 Units: A Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies**

Dr. David “Lou” Ferland, Chief of Police (Ret.), Executive Director Don Slavik (USPCA), Captain John Kerwick (Ret.), Director Tom Sharp (AKC Reunite).

**NOTE: This is a briefing built from the International Association of Chief’s of Police 2024 Annual Conference where members of the USPCA Best Practices Group delivered a presentation on K-9 Unit Fundraising for Small Agencies. This is a written form of that visual in-person presentation.**

K-9 units play a crucial role in law enforcement operations, from detecting drugs and explosives to providing protection for officers in dangerous situations (Harris, 2016). Despite their significance, many police K-9 units face challenges in securing sufficient funding for these K-9 Units. Law enforcement agencies often find themselves strapped for time, and officers are not trained in fundraising. However, public support for police K-9s is strong, and many individuals are willing to contribute to these programs, especially when they understand how their donations will make a difference.

This article explores strategies for successfully fundraising for K-9 units, from developing a strong foundation to leveraging community support and securing grants. By adopting the right approach, even smaller agencies can secure the financial resources needed to support their K-9 teams.

Many law enforcement officers are focused on their primary duties, leaving little time or expertise for fundraising. As a result, K-9 units often struggle to maintain their operations due to local budgetary constraints. Additionally, smaller agencies often lack the infrastructure and resources to organize right-scaled fundraising efforts. However, the demand for K-9 units in law enforcement continues to grow, and finding ways to sustain these programs is vital for public safety and agency public relations.

While many departments face challenges in raising funds through local tax money, public support for K-9 units is substantial. People are naturally drawn to the idea of supporting law enforcement and K-9’s seeing them as loyal protectors of their communities and to the officers that serve. Research indicates that close to 70% of donations come from individuals, not corporations, demonstrating that grassroots support can be an essential source of funding for K-9 units (Childres, 2024).

One of the most significant challenges in fundraising for K-9 units is managing long-term financial planning or in other words, having a budget (Foundation, 2024). Agencies must anticipate the costs involved in maintaining K-9 programs, including the purchase of dogs, veterinary care, effective training, equipment, and administrative costs. Here is a good link for a model budget and other resources (<https://stantonk9foundation.org/k9-unit-establishment-grants/resources>). Without a clear and sustainable budget, K-9 units can easily fall short of their funding needs (Police1, 2005) (National Police K-9 Foundation, 2021).

For some agencies, setting up a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization is a vital step in securing sustainable funding. A nonprofit status such as one with the title like ‘*FRIENDS* of *YOUR DEPARTMENT* K-9 FOUNDATION’ provides tax benefits for donors and offers more flexibility in applying for grants. Vital steps towards this initiative would be (Police1, 2020):

* Filing Articles of Incorporation, which is most often done through your state Secretary of State Department;
* Forming a Board of Trustees (Not just cops);
* Drafting by-laws to guide your nonprofit operations and duties;
* Obtaining a Federal Tax ID number (Service, Application for IRS EIN/Tax ID Number, 2024);
* Applying to the Internal Revenue Service to be recognized as a tax-exempt organization (Service, Charities and Nonprofits, 2024);
* Registering as a charitable organization within your state, which is required in 40 states (Group, 2024).

Some agencies may opt to partner with an existing police association or local service group like the Rotary to include K-9s as part of their broader initiative. Some benefits of that would be that the existing group already has by-laws in place, the IRS paperwork done, board of directors already established and likely a track record of successful fundraising. A K-9 unit can access these resources, build credibility, and establish a reliable stream of donations using these already reputable groups and personal expertise.

An effective fundraising strategy involves building relationships with local businesses, community leaders, and residents. By creating awareness of the K-9 unit’s role in public safety and engaging with local organizations, police departments can foster community support. Hosting events such as K-9 Academy open houses, dog wash fundraisers, or charity challenges (like Texas Hold’em tournaments or a gaming night at a local casino) can help create strong ties with local residents and businesses. Asking for in-kind contributions, such as supplies, services, or event space, can also significantly reduce fundraising costs (HUB, n.d.).

While individual donations are a primary source of revenue, law enforcement agencies should also consider exploring additional funding opportunities, such as:

* **Grants**: Federal and state grants, while complex to apply for, can be a valuable resource. Agencies should seek help from local senators or representatives to navigate this application process. Organizations like the **AKC Reunite K9 Cop Grant** or **The Stanton Foundation** offer MUCH easier funding grants for K-9 units. For example, **AKC Reunite K9 Cop Grant**, matches $3 for every $1 raised by the department up to $7,500. The **Stanton Foundation** has also provided millions in grants to establish and maintain K-9 units in various states. Additionally, the **National Police Dog Foundation, Working Dog Foundation,** and **K9s4COPS** offer grant opportunities for departments looking to start or expand their K-9 programs.
* **Memorials and Honorary Gifts**: Many people prefer to donate in memory of a loved one or in honor of a person they admire. Memorial funds can be a unique and meaningful way to raise money for a K-9 unit.
* **Matching Grants**: Some corporations or large donors may offer matching grant opportunities, which can significantly increase the amount of funding raised.
* **Comics for K-9s**: These toys or training tools can be donated to help keep the K-9s engaged and active.
* **Challenge Coins**: Selling custom-made challenge coins or merchandise can be a profitable way to raise money.
* **Adopt-a-K9 Programs**: Some agencies offer “adoption” programs for retired K-9s, where individuals can financially support the dog’s retirement care.

While there are numerous fundraising opportunities, it is important to avoid ineffective or overly complicated methods (pitfalls) that can drain resources without yielding substantial returns. Here are a few pitfalls to watch out for:

* **Raffles, Tee Shirt Sales, and Auctions**: These methods often require substantial time and effort by the group but may not generate enough funds to justify the resources spent.
* **GoFundMe and Online Fundraisers**: While these platforms can be useful, they are often not as effective for large-scale fundraising campaigns, especially for K-9 units. Many people do not trust these fundraisers or the percentage of ‘take’ they get from the donation for their service. There have also been numerous announcements placed by police departments about sketchy phone fundraising so using one would be sending conflicting advice.
* **Lack of Deadline or Thank You**: A crucial element of successful fundraising is creating urgency and acknowledging donors. Without a clear deadline or personalized thank-you notes, donors may feel unappreciated and less likely to contribute in the future.

Fundraising for police K-9 units is an essential, though sometimes challenging task for law police agencies. By taking a **proactive** and **strategic** approach to fundraising—whether through community engagement, grants, or in-kind contributions—agencies can ensure their K-9 units are well-equipped to serve and protect the public. Establishing a nonprofit organization, building relationships with local businesses, and avoiding common fundraising pitfalls are key steps to successfully supporting K-9 programs. By following these strategies and utilizing available resources, even small police departments can secure the necessary funding to maintain and expand their K-9 units.

For more information, reach out to the Authors at:

Dr. David “Lou” Ferland (Chief of Police, Ret.) at [DavidFerlandK9@gmail.com](mailto:DavidFerlandK9@gmail.com)

Executive Director Don Slavik (USPCA) at [executivedirector@uspcak9.com](mailto:executivedirector@uspcak9.com)

Captain John Kerwick (Ret.) at [uspcaexplosives@gmail.com](mailto:uspcaexplosives@gmail.com)

Director Tom Sharp (AKC Reunite) at [Tom.Sharp@akcreunite.org](mailto:Tom.Sharp@akcreunite.org)

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