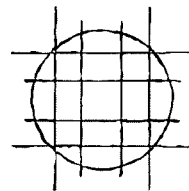


Training and Consulting Team, LLC

Law Enforcement Training and Consulting • Expert Witness Services



April 26, 2021

TO: Vacaville Police Department
660 Merchant Street
Vacaville, California 95688

VIA: City Attorney Melinda Stewart
Captain Chris Polen
Lieutenant David Kellis

SUBJECT: "Report of Assessment" by Anchor Therapy Clinic

I have been asked to review the "Report of Assessment" submitted by the Anchor Therapy Clinic and Kevin Cameron dated January 18, 2021, with respect to "Canine (Gus) Cognitive and Workability Evaluation." I am going to address three areas contained within the assessment; 1) POST certifications, 2) proper K9 training related to the Vacaville Police Department, and 3) physical condition of the police dog Gus.

Background: An internal investigation was initiated after a video-taped incident this past December was shared on local television (and social media) showing a handler striking his police dog once after performing an "alpha roll" technique during a training session when the dog became handler-aggressive. The video did not show the circumstances preceding the strike. The police dog was subsequently taken from the handler, evaluated at VCA Sacramento Veterinary Referral Center, and kenneled at Law Dogs for approximately 17 days under the care of the department's K9 trainer (Steve Brewer). The dog was later re-examined at VCA and then transported to and evaluated at Anchor Therapy Clinic.

According to the report, Dr. Kevin Cameron made several assessments on the following dates in 2021; January 15, 16, and 17. Some of these assessments were specific to K9 Gus and others were related to the K9 program in general.

1. **POST Certifications.** Dr. Cameron indicates a POST certification was attempted with K9 Gus possibly under the doctor's supervision that documents failures in all competencies tested to include four patrol-based exercises and one detection-based exercise. The following information deemed essential as basic data elements for an evaluation

certification was not recorded; date, location, distractions, name of the person serving as the handler, and the name of the person conducting the evaluation. The detection exercise notes did not record the types of “substances” used, quantities, or search areas.

Although it is not a required element in normal certification documentation, the experience level of the person serving as the handler for these test attempts and the amount of time spent with K9 Gus before these tests might be beneficial to assist in assessing the outcomes.

A “DoD Working Dog certification” was scheduled to be conducted to be utilized as a comparison to the POST certification and assist in determining workability but does not clarify if that certification was to be patrol or detection related. The detection certification was cancelled “due to a lack of obedience and safety concerns with the canine.”

NOTE: Dr. Cameron provided a “background of opinion” as qualifications in a letter to Janson Roberts on December 30, 2021, that identifies Cameron as a “POST K9 Evaluator.” California POST K9 evaluators should have a minimum of five years experience as a law enforcement K9 Handler or law enforcement K9 trainer, and a minimum of 200 hours of documented training in the area they are evaluating. It is not clear if Dr. Cameron ever worked or trained a patrol dog as his background appears to be detection related. I do not know if Dr. Cameron served as the handler or evaluator for the attempted certification tasks addressed within the report submitted because it was not recorded.

I think it is important to mention that California POST certifications and others are not intended to evaluate the performance of a K9 team (handler and police dog) for the purposes of a legitimate certification or performance-based testing when a handler and police dog may have only been training together or acquainted for a day or two. Most certifications occur after a K9 team has been together for and completed a structured basic training course and simultaneous bonding period for at least 4 weeks minimally.

Dr. Cameron mentions “a canine will perform differently for a stranger as opposed to its bonded handler” but gives no credit to this situation for purposes of his assessment nor any explanation of prior training or preparation to perform the tests that may have occurred in three days or less with the person serving as the new handler. According to Dr. Cameron, a “working rapport between a canine and a handler traditionally takes a minimum of 30 days and up to 6 months.”

The “POST Certification Evaluation Results” contained in the report do not adequately note the performance or any extenuating circumstances.

For the "Obedience" test, it does not appear the handler was able to control the dog and raises questions whether the proper commands were being utilized and what preparation preceded the test to acclimate the dog with the new handler. If the test was unable to be evaluated, the result is not a failure.

For the "Patrol Search" documented as a failure, it notes the "canine requires direct cue" but does explain if a proper search command was given to the dog, what area was to be searched, and if the dog attempted any search. If the dog did not understand the task and the test was not performed, it is not a failure.

For the "Apprehension" and "Handler Protection" tests documented as failures, neither test was performed "due to safety concerns and lack of obedience." If neither test was conducted, a failure is not the result.

I find it difficult to believe, but acknowledge the possibility, the dog was unable to locate one substance out of ten in a controlled environment for the "Detection" test. However, the presentation of a search area to the dog and commands used by a handler to initiate a search for narcotic substances is a key component of a team effort achieved over time, not overnight. If the dog did not understand the task and did not search, a failure is not the result.

As a POST K9 Team Evaluator for over 20 years, I find these "POST Certification Evaluation Results" to be unacceptable as submitted. The results and notes lack clarity. If the handler was unable to control the dog and safety concerns and lack of obedience existed, it would be impractical to proceed with an evaluation and a certified evaluator would not conduct a certification under the conditions as described.

In the report, it states "According to identified standards, the canine team was allotted approximately 30 days of the 3-4 months to complete the necessary training program to meet certification standards." I found no standards or documentation in support of this statement.

In the report, it states "The department identified that the canine was trained and certified by the same individual." According to the documentation I reviewed and an interview with Sergeant Frank Piro (the K9 supervisor), the K9 team was trained by Steve Brewer from Law Dogs and the K9 team was later POST certified by a POST K9 team evaluator (not affiliated with Law Dogs) on December 30, 2020.

It is my opinion the POST certification of the K9 team met standards and cannot be compared to a certification attempt by a new handler not familiar to the dog after the dog had been basically kenneled for 17 days or more.

In the report, it states "It is recommended that certification officials be disinterested parties not directly associated with the certifying canine team's training or utilization per POST certification recommended standards." The word "utilization" or similar is not contained nor addressed within the POST standards. According to the documentation I reviewed and an interview with Sergeant Piro, POST certifications of the VVPD K9 teams are not conducted by the training vendor or its employees.

It is my opinion the POST certifications of all VVPD K9 teams meets standards and complies with department policy and any conflict of interests with respect to the POST evaluators does not exist per the POST guidelines.

- 2. Proper K9 training related to the Vacaville Police Department.** My comprehensive evaluation of the Vacaville Police Department revealed the department policy addresses training and establishes guidelines to achieve it. Training is recorded and primarily retained within the PackTrack system designed specifically to record and track K9 training."My recent evaluation of the Vacaville Police Department's K9 program opined the department policy for its K9 program addresses proper training and establishes guidelines to achieve it. Training is recorded and primarily retained within the PackTrack system designed specifically to record and track K9 training. There is no evidence or supporting documentation to suggest that proper K9 training for street deployments in patrol and detection work is not being conducted.

In the report, it states "Assessment of the canine identified the canine lacked basic fundamental training to meet POST certification criteria, calling into question the POST certification's validity." A certification is a team event of both the handler and the police dog. A police dog does not certify on its own. The attempts of a certification with K9 Gus with an unidentified handler do not call into question the validity of the previous POST certification nor its relationship to any training provided.

Dr. Cameron did not observe the POST certification of the K9 team as it was being conducted this past December nor able to compare the test outcomes with the written documentation of each test to determine its validity. To my knowledge, Dr. Cameron has not observed any certifications of K9 teams for Vacaville Police Department nor fundamental training conducted by its contracted trainer.

A recommendation from my recent evaluation did address some type of formal training before or after the "basic handler's course" be provided to a new handler to learn how to properly care for a police dog to include, but not limited to, basic first aid, nutritional requirements, grooming, bathing, behavior monitoring, kennel maintenance, exercising, socialization, and conducting visual and physical health inspections at

home and after a work-related deployment or physical encounter with a suspect.

- 3. Physical condition of the police dog Gus.** I did not personally inspect or observe K9 Gus during my recent site visit as part of my evaluation of the Vacaville Police Department K9 Unit. However, I did read a physical assessment of the dog by Dr. Cameron indicating “the canine appeared to be malnourished or underfed” and addressing “significant concerns about the canine’s health and welfare.”

These observations and concerns by Dr. Cameron seem to conflict with observations shared by Dr. Chris Wong, DVM, from the VCA Sacramento Veterinary Referral Center, who reported on December 30, 2020, among other things, the dog was “bright, alert, responsive, hydrated” and “does not exhibit any shyness” and “is excited and friendly to me and my staff.” Dr. Wong addressed the “alpha roll” incident reporting “There were allegations that [K9 Gus] had received several punches to the face from his handler on Dec 28, 2020. [Gus] seemed to be doing fine and has been eating, drinking, and behaving normally after the incident.”

On January 15, 2021, Dr. Wong, after conducting another physical examination, reported “[K9 Gus] seems to be in good health with no pain nor behavioral problems that would prevent him from undergoing further training in the City of Vacaville Police canine unit.”

Overall, I find this assessment of K9 Gus to be inconsistent with K9 team certification standards in California, conflicts with VCA observations about Gus’ physical condition, and lacks foundation in evaluating the department’s K9 training program that should have included direct observations, interviews of principle participants, and a review of training documentation.

Respectfully submitted,


Bill Lewis II