

Training A K9 Officer

Canine police officers are invaluable in a wide range of law enforcement work. They detect narcotics, explosives, and other illegal materials, track criminals, help enforce public order, and protect their human partners. Little wonder, then, that their training is thorough, challenging, and lifelong. First, dogs are carefully bred and selected. What makes a great K9 officer? Requirements like a first-rate nose, strong prey or play drive, stamina, and high trainability place German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, and Belgian Malinois at the top of the selection pile. Important character traits are friendliness, an even disposition, intelligence, courage, and the ability to switch between adrenaline-fused situations on the job and mellow interactions with the general public, for example in schools and out on the streets.

Training starts with basic—but comprehensive and targeted—obedience work. Candidates who meet all the criteria progress to specialized training for police work and eventually graduate to proper K9 officers. Then, the dogs are paired with a handler and a new level of training begins: turning a dog and a person into a team, a K9 unit. And training doesn't end when the two begin working the field. Federal recommendations call for 16 hours of ongoing training per month, and many agencies practice more.