




PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND
FIRE/EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT GENERAL ORDER

General Order Number: 08-26	Effective Date: February 9, 2023
Division: Health & Safety	
Chapter: Comfort Canine Program	
By Order of the County Fire Chief: Tiffany D. Green 	Issue Date: February 9, 2023

POLICY

The Prince George's County Fire/Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Department recognizes the impact of occupational stress and the mental wellness of its members. This Comfort Canine Program is being implemented to help our members cope with the stressors of their duties and to enhance their mental health and wellbeing. Effective management of occupational stress improves job performance and overall safety.

Members are entrusted with the responsibility to protect the lives and property of the residents of Prince George's County, and it is of paramount importance that members obtain supplemental Departmental assistance for any problem that has the potential to interfere with the services we provide.

The Comfort Canine Program will be assigned to the Health & Wellness Office and tasked with providing Comfort Canine response services to all members of Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department. The Comfort Canine(s) will be owned by the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department, and supported by a designated handler, who will be a sworn member of the Department.

DEFINITIONS

Animal Assisted Therapy – A type of therapeutic approach that utilizes an animal, commonly a canine, in order to provide psychological and emotional support to individuals.

Comfort Canine – A canine owned by the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department for the purposes of peer support, otherwise referred to or known as Animal Assisted Therapy. The canine will have received adequate therapy dog training and support dog training prior to beginning service with the Department.

Comfort Canine Handler – A member of Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department who is permanently assigned to work with the Comfort Canine. This member would be selected by the County Fire Chief through an application process and assigned to the Health & Wellness Office. The Canine Handler is responsible for all canine-related aspects of the program, to include coordinating and conducting station visits, completing training requirements, and other duties as specified.



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Comfort Canine Program – A Prince George's County Fire/EMS program designed to promote the mental wellness and health of all members utilizing Animal Assisted Therapy and Peer Support techniques.

Comfort Canine Team – One canine and one canine handler who have successfully completed a course of instruction and provide Comfort Canine support services to members of the Fire/EMS Department.

PROCEDURES / RESPONSIBILITIES

I. General Provisions

- A. The Comfort Canine Program will provide mental health support to members of the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department by combining Peer Support and Animal Assisted Therapy techniques. This program seeks to assist members by providing stress relief and a sense of connection during difficult situations. The Comfort Canine Program may reduce negative outcomes related to trauma, such as substance abuse and elevated suicidal ideation.
- B. The Health & Wellness Office will oversee the Comfort Canine Program.
- C. Canine Training
 - 1. Comfort Canine Teams must complete a service/therapy dog training program approved by the County Fire Chief prior to deployment. Comfort Canine Teams must continue regularly scheduled follow-up trainings after the team is deployed. The team will continue training as recommended by a training organization approved by the County Fire Chief.
 - 2. The cost of the initial and ongoing service/therapy dog training will be paid for by the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department. The County Fire Chief must approve any additional training.
- D. Canine Care & Maintenance
 - 1. The cost of veterinary care, food, and grooming will be covered by the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department through the Expense Requisition Form (ERF) guidelines and process. The handler must assume any additional expenses not authorized by the County Fire Chief.
 - 2. A handler must make all reasonable efforts to maintain the canine in excellent physical condition.
 - 3. A handler must use a County-based veterinarian facility and must follow County vendor rules and regulations. Canines will receive treatment as recommended by the veterinarian.



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E. Canine Boarding

1. In the event that a handler is unable or unavailable to care for the canine, the dog shall be boarded with the training organization, if possible.
2. Any boarding or other care arrangements require written authorization from the Canine Team supervisor and/or Office of the Fire Chief.
3. The handler must use an "out of office notification" whenever the team is unavailable.

II. Canine Handler

A. Personnel shall meet the minimum qualifications in order to be considered for a Comfort Canine Handler position.

1. The handler should be a sworn Fire/EMS member who can be detailed full-time to the Health & Wellness Office.
2. A handler must either own their own residence, or if renting, provide documentation from the owner indicating that they will allow a working canine to reside on the premises.
3. Prior to selection, the residence will be inspected by the supervisor/coordinator or their designee under which the Canine Team will operate.
4. The handler should already have experience in a peer support, crisis intervention, or related role.
5. The handler must commit to working with the Department as a Comfort Canine Handler for the dog's workable lifetime (7-10 years). A handler must sign an agreement with the Department outlining this commitment.
6. The handler should be willing and able to engage in extensive cooperation and collaboration with Peer Support and Employee and Volunteer Assistance Program (EAP/VAP) personnel.

B. Duties & Responsibilities

1. The handler must:
 - a) Provide and coordinate all care and training for the Comfort Canine. This includes housing the canine, which will live with the handler and work alongside the handler full-time.
 - b) Keep records of all trainings completed by the Comfort Canine Team.
 - c) Conduct station visits during work hours and occasionally after hours as needed. The handler will collaborate with Peer Support Team Members and EAP/VAP personnel for service provision as needed, particularly after potentially traumatic calls.
 - d) Maintain records and reports for services provided.
 - e) Work with the handler's supervisor to coordinate housing and care of the canine when scheduled to work overtime (OT).



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- f) Be responsible for the actions of their assigned canine at all times. Discretion should be used during any interaction between the assigned canine and other individuals or animals. The handler should have immediate control of the canine when interaction is permitted.
- C. Vehicles
 - 1. The Comfort Canine Handler will be assigned a vehicle to be used for work purposes only.
 - 2. This vehicle will be outfitted with any additional equipment necessary to ensure the safe transport of the canine.
 - 3. All canine vehicles will be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition at all times.
- D. Separation/Termination
 - 1. Premature separation of the handler from the Department will put the relationship between the Department and the training organization at risk of termination. The handler should avoid, however possible, separation from the Department during the workable lifetime of the canine.

III. Support Visits & Services

- A. The Comfort Canine may be utilized in various situations including, but not limited to:
 - 1. Following a response to a traumatic or potentially traumatic incident.
 - 2. Routine requests for Peer Support.
 - 3. EAP visits, if requested.
 - 4. Routine station visits and check-ins.
 - 5. Following Line of Duty Deaths or Line of Duty Injuries.
 - 6. Community events when requested.

IV. Reporting and Recordkeeping Procedures

- A. The Canine Handler should implement and manage thorough recordkeeping procedures for tracking the efficiency, output, and impact of the program. This data will be instrumental in the securing of future funding and in justifying the need for the program. The following information should be collected:
 - 1. Number of visits.
 - 2. Specific reason(s) for visits.
 - 3. Duration of each visit.
 - 4. Who requested a visit or if the handler initiated the visit.
 - 5. Outcomes and/or feedback or program evaluations.



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B. The Handler must track any approved expenses related to the canine whether the expense was paid for upfront by the Department, paid by the handler and approved for reimbursement, or is an additional expense to be covered by the handler and not approved for reimbursement. These approved expenses include, but are not limited to:

1. Food,
2. Veterinary care (routine or emergency),
3. Grooming, and
4. Pet supplies (leashes, beds, etc.).

C. Dog Bites/Injury to the Dog

1. If the canine injures a person, the handler will ensure that the person is transported to a medical facility. If treatment is refused, an EMS report will be completed and signed by the person indicating the refusal. The handler will also ensure that the appropriate police department is notified, and a copy of the police report is obtained.
2. The handler will immediately notify their supervisor, who will then inform the Office of the Fire Chief. The supervisor will obtain a written statement from the handler, the victim, and any witnesses. If the victim refuses treatment or refuses to provide a written statement, that information will be noted in the Incident Report.
3. If a canine is injured, the handler will evaluate the extent of the injuries to determine if immediate medical attention is needed. Medical attention will normally be provided by the canine's designated veterinarian. In an emergency, the canine may be transported to an approved vendor for emergency veterinary care.
4. If an injury to a person or the canine occurs as described in this section, the handler will prepare a detailed report describing the circumstances surrounding the incident, how the injury occurred, and all actions taken. The handler will forward the report to the handler's supervisor within 24 hours.
5. The supervisor will review all reports, statements, and information and compile a comprehensive report of the incident. The supervisor will submit the comprehensive report to the County Fire Chief through the chain-of-command within 48 hours of the incident.

REFERENCES

N/A

FORMS / ATTACHMENTS

Station Visit Request Form



**PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND
FIRE / EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT**



Comfort Canine Station Visit Request Form

Today's Date: Click or tap to enter a date.	Requested Date of Visit: Click or tap to enter a date.
Requestor Name & Title: Click or tap here to enter text.	
Location of Visit: Click or tap here to enter text.	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Request <input type="checkbox"/> Group Request

Please provide a brief description of the need for the Comfort Canine visit:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Please describe any relevant behaviors or actions displayed by the employee(s) in need of comfort (if applicable):

Click or tap here to enter text.

Is additional support needed (e.g., Peer Support, EAP/VAP counselors):

Click or tap here to enter text.

Return form to: Health & Wellness Office
Health_Wellness.PGFD@co.pg.md.us

6820 Webster Street, Suite 120
Landover Hills, Maryland 20784
Office: 301-583-1951



ONE COUNTY. ONE DEPARTMENT. ONE MISSION.