

## **A Doggone Good Idea - Creating a K-9 Advantage**

*By Laura King & Rick Bragga, JD, FAHP*

How do you engage community leaders and connect them to your hospital, especially, if healthcare is not their highest priority? At Indiana University Health Methodist Hospital, it required a doggone good idea.

Essentially, it was *fund development 101* – match a donor’s passion with a hospital need and create a partnership. When the prospective donor’s passion is centered on animals, dogs in particular, that might seem like a quantum leap. But for Methodist Health Foundation, the hospital’s steward of charitable support, it was only a minor stretch.

The concept of canine units in hospitals is not new. IU Health Methodist followed the *paw prints* of other successful programs around the country. The idea to bring a K-9 program to IU Health Methodist originated with an article in the *Emergency Medicine Nursing Journal*. From there, the hospital’s safety and security department stepped in.

“We started at the request of the emergency department,” says Pitt Thompson, Vice President of Operations for IU Health. “That led us to the K-9 program at Scottsdale Healthcare in Arizona. They started with one team and now have eight dog/handler units that patrol the facilities. Their staff has been receptive to the dogs and found the K-9 teams to be highly effective.”

According to Dr. Charles Shufflebarger, Medical Director of IU Health Methodist Emergency Medicine Trauma Center, “Our ED is one of the busiest in the nation. We see on average, 320 patients per day and usually, when they are the most critically ill and injured. That often leads to distraught and panicked patients and families.”

The dog/handler teams provide multiple benefits to this dynamic atmosphere. Dog-human interactions can improve mood, have a measurable calming effect, lower blood pressure and heart rate and stimulate other factors to promote healing. Dogs also have the capacity to be friendly, approachable and sociable with patients, families and employees, but can provide protection as well.

With any project, especially in tough economic times, funding is an issue. But creative thinking with regard to potential prospects is not unusual at IU Health Methodist. Over 100 years ago, a gift of \$4,750 from a Methodist church youth group was the seed from which the hospital grew. Who would have thought of children building a hospital? The same kind of people who, a century later, had a project they believed would interest a passionate dog lover!

Polly Horton Hix, a community leader and philanthropist was the perfect prospect. She had made gifts to the hospital before, but was highly interested in animals – especially dogs. Not only was she a supporter of the Indianapolis Zoo but her champion Great Danes had been shown and won at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. In addition, Polly is a retired Major with the Marion County Sheriff's department.

According to Hix, "As an animal lover, breeder and owner of dogs, I know how much they give back to us. They bring us comfort, joy, unconditional love and attention."

Establishing contact with Polly was also an unconventional strategy that worked. Knowing Polly's history and passion, Methodist Health Foundation Development Officer, Hillary McCarley sent her an annual report with a handwritten note. It simply stated, "You and I share something in common – a love of dogs. We are starting a K-9 program at the hospital and we'd love your help." McCarley is indeed a dog lover

and has a therapy dog to assist her son. Two months later she received a return call. One week later, a face-to-face visit. Another ten months of discussions followed, culminating in a pledge to support the initial three years of this pilot program.

With this generous commitment, the **Polly H. Hix Foundation K-9 Security Team at Indiana University Health Methodist Hospital** was launched. Captain Pat Tomkins, a retired sheriff's department deputy was selected as the first handler of Bones, a two-year-old German Shepherd and IU Health Methodist Hospital's first K-9 employee. They were followed by Officer Kenny White and Delta, also a German Shepherd. A special dog room was built in the emergency department for Bones and Delta. Each dog had previously received six weeks of intensive training. They have additional training each week to maintain their skills.

Initially, there was concern about the image that the K-9 unit might project. However, the result has been nothing but positive for staff, families and patients. M. Kathy Hendershot, Director of Clinical Operations, Emergency Medicine Trauma Center says, "It's amazing what a difference Bones and Delta have made in the emergency department. And not just for patients and visitors; for the staff, they have become close members of our hospital family. I'd like to have those dogs here [in the ED] 24/7."

Dr. Shufflebarger wholeheartedly agrees. "Our employees are in the trenches doing very difficult work. They often see patients at their most vulnerable and it can be stressful. Having Bones and Delta on site makes us feel better, especially if we've had a particularly difficult day. This program is an absolute homerun and we are so grateful to Polly Hix and her foundation for making it possible."

According to Captain Tompkins, there have been occasions when nurses encountered charged situations and asked for K-9 assistance, but most of their time is spent patrolling and talking with people.

“Everybody tells me about their dog. Patients are away from home and away from their own pets. So when they see Bones and Delta, they get excited – it lifts their spirits.”

In response to possible image concerns and to ensure that this significant contribution was properly recognized, a marketing and public relations plan was implemented including logo development, program identity, handler uniforms and signage for vehicles and the department. The standard press release, news conference and internal communication activities were also employed. The creation of “hero cards” for the K-9 teams was another idea borrowed from Scottsdale. Similar to baseball cards, they include a photo on the front and biographical information on the back. They are given to children and others as a memento of their interaction with the K-9 team.

The acceptance of the dogs has been so positive that two additional teams are in the works for 2012 and efforts have begun to secure the necessary funding. A wishing well located in the emergency department provides visibility and a means for making smaller contributions. An endowment is also being explored to assure the longevity of this now highly successful and well integrated K-9 program.

Just like any other program, the hospital tracks several key K-9 quality indicators including patient interaction; visitor interaction; staff interaction and security assistance or intervention.

The responses to K-9 team have been especially enthusiastic from patients, both in the emergency department and from those who receive visits in their rooms (see below story, *A Bone for Tomorrow*). In an unsolicited letter written to Safety & Security, Naomi Treon said, “Let me take this opportunity to share the recent blessing of feeling loved, treasured and safe during my stay at Methodist Hospital. In the Emergency Department, I saw blazing overhead lights...and a kind gentleman asked if I was an animal lover. With my “yes,” I met Delta who approached and licked my hand in a loving way. I was admitted

to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor for nine days. During daily rounds, Delta found ways to express energy for my efforts to survive. Whoever thought of starting this wonderful program was truly a genius. I, for one, will always be grateful.”

### What did we learn from this effort?

One message is clear. If you engage people in *their* passion as opposed to *your* primary needs, you can be more successful. Secondly, you don't always have to ask for traditional healthcare needs. Whether it's a K-9 program, pet therapy, music, sculpture or other art, there are many ways to enhance the patient and visitor experience at a hospital. And finally, there are many generous people who are passionate about nontraditional programs in a hospital setting. Unleash your creativity and engage them. For Methodist Health Foundation and IU Health Methodist Hospital, it turned out to be a doggone good idea.

### A Bone for Tomorrow

“One day in a hospital is more time than anyone should have to spend. One quickly loses all perception of time. We are all the same in a dog's eyes. When you are very sick and lying in a hospital bed, the one thing you can count on is that his tail will be wagging. Dogs are intuitive. Bones knew what Mary needed. Mary needed Bones. Mary loved him and looked forward to his visits. She spent her 55<sup>th</sup> and last birthday in the hospital. One of the gifts she received was a dog bone with a message that Bones would be coming by the next day to get his treat.....the monotony of today broken by the anticipation of tomorrow. Bones was good for Mary and he will be for many others to come. A final message to Bones from Mary...Thank you Bones for brightening my days. Keep wagging!” – *Mary's Family*

*[Authors' note: Mary was a terminally ill patient in the Yellow Rose Unit of IU Health Hospice]*

## Author Biographies

Laura King is director of marketing & communications for Methodist Health Foundation. Laura has more than 25 years experience in marketing, communications, public relations and television production and has worked in a variety of settings from sports marketing and human services to health care.

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