

## **Executive Summary**

This report provides information to the Emergency Services Committee on a new initiative to reduce the frequency and severity of occupational mental health stress to our first responders. Paramedic and Fire Services are collaborating in this joint venture to implement a trained, certified Facility Dog Program for the Community Safety Department.

A Facility Dog is owned and trained by the National Service Dogs (NSD), a charitable organization certified by Assistance Dog International (ADI). Unlike Service Dogs, which perform specific tasks for their owners, or emotional support dogs, which provide therapeutic benefits to owners, Facility Dogs are suited to work in a variety of environments and are accustomed to interacting with many different types of people. The role of the Facility Dog is to provide an additional option of preventative mental health support to all staff through providing a healthy and positive distraction to upsetting matters and aiding in the healing process. Facility Dogs also assist to break down communication barriers and allow staff to speak freely about mental health.

Currently, Community Safety is in the process of submitting an application to the National Service Dogs organization, expressing an interest to acquire a Facility Dog.

## **Background**

Over the past number of years, the Community Safety Department has implemented a number of initiatives to assist our front line staff in developing their personal resiliency against occupational stress injuries. Our initiatives include wellness policies, mental health education, physical fitness, rapid access to mental health treatment services and the implementation of a Peer Support Network to reduce the impact of Occupational Stress Injuries (OSI).

Over the past two years WSIB costs related to psychological claims by Community Safety staff have accumulated in excess of over \$1 million. Community Safety continues to explore programs to provide preventative mental health support to reduce WSIB cost. One program Community Safety reviewed is a Facility Dog. Research by UCLA Health <https://www.uclahealth.org/pac/animal-assisted-therapy> confirmed that “interaction with a therapy dog provides both a mental and physical health benefit”. The research also indicates that “humans interacting with animals have found that petting the animal promoted the release of serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin - all hormones that can play a part in elevating moods, lower anxiety, helps people relax, provides comfort, reduces loneliness and increases mental stimulation”. Overall, a Facility Dog program provides a calming influence to those who may be highly agitated or highly emotional, helping to normalize traumatic situations and enhancing feelings of safety and wellbeing. The Facility Dog acts as an icebreaker for difficult conversations and provides a healthy and positive distraction to upsetting matters.

## **Facility Dog**

A Facility Dog is trained by an organization certified by Assistance Dogs International (ADI). Throughout training, the Facility Dog is evaluated for health, personality, and temperament. It is

important to note that a facility dog is a working dog, they are not a family pet, station dog or Community Safety mascot. A Facility Dog is specifically bred and selected to perform their duties, as well as trained to work with people who require emotional support and has passed strict public access tests.

Facility Dogs are part of a specially trained dog/handler team that provides goal directed interventions which promote improvement in physical, social, emotional, or cognitive abilities. A Facility Dog's activities are directed by a professional handler with specialized expertise.

The dog works in a variety of settings. The handler will be responsible to schedule regular visits at Community Safety facilities, providing the opportunity for Community Safety staff to interact with the Facility Dog. The Facility Dog is also used for post tragic events to assist staff in de-escalating their personal stress levels.

When not at work, the dog lives with their primary handler as part of their family.

The facility dog remains the property of National Service Dogs, but the expense of feeding and veterinary care is incurred by the Service.

## **Acquiring a Facility Dog**

It can take up to two years to acquire a Facility Dog, this process is dependent on the availability of a trained dog and establishing the service guidelines to implement the program. The initial phase to acquire a Facility Dog begins with the Service submitting an application to the NSD. Once the application has been reviewed and approved by the NSD, the next phase is to select handlers. This phase consists of determining interested staff, conducting interviews and providing specialty training to be a handler.

At this time the General Manager of Community Safety has approved the submission of an expression of interest application to the NSD to implement a Facility Dog Program and is seeking the Emergency Services Committee's approval to enter into any agreements with NSD to obtain a dog.

## **Accessing Facility Dog Services**

The Facility Dog handler is responsible for developing a schedule to allow the Facility Dog to visit all Community Safety workplaces. When not conducting station visits, the Facility Dog will be assigned to a determined location to interact with Community Safety staff during shift commencement, training, and staff engagement sessions, etc. The handlers schedule will be altered throughout the year to allow the opportunity for all Community Safety staff to connect with the Facility Dog. The handler at times will be required to volunteer their time during specific events, such as debriefings after a critical incident or visiting Community Safety staff that want to spend extra time with the dog at a station.

The Facility Dog handlers are to comply with all local laws regarding licensing, vaccinations, leash laws, sanitization laws and other ordinances relating to having a dog in their care. The City of Greater Sudbury has a policy for "Use of Service Animals in the Workplace". As the

Facility Dog will be shared among different Community Safety facilities the Corporate Policy will need to be amended to strictly reflect the situation for Community Safety. If the Facility Dog attends other City of Greater Sudbury buildings, the Corporate Policy will be followed.

The Facility Dog will always have a vest on when in service or available for service. The vest is not required when the dog is off duty.

## **Financial implications**

The initial startup cost for the Facility Dog is approximately \$10,000. This cost includes the mandatory training for the handlers established by the NSD and the equipment for the dog when at the primary or secondary handlers' residence or within the Community Safety facility. In addition, the handlers will be required to attend training which includes: Mental Health First Aid, Applied Suicide Prevention Skills Training (ASSIST), Trauma Informed Training through Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) to prevent vicarious trauma and assist them in their role.

The initial startup cost will be covered by the one-time funding provided by the Province for Psychological Mental Health Programs to address OSI to First Responders.

The average size of a Facility Dog is approximately 70 pounds. The anticipated annual cost of the Facility Dog is approximately \$5,000. This cost includes, veterinary, food cost for a prescription quality maintenance diet, and grooming. On-going costs will be shared within the Community Safety operating budget.

## **Conclusion**

Facility Dog programs have demonstrated their value to enhance preventative mental health programs and improve the mental and physical health of staff working in a first responder role. The goal of this initiative is to establish a Facility Dog, providing an additional preventative mental health program to support the Community Safety staff and also reduce WSIB claims and costs in the future.

Community Safety is currently in the initial phase of implementing a Facility Dog program. The General Manager of Community Safety has approved the submission of an expression of interest application to the NSD and is seeking the Emergency Services Committee's approval to enter into an agreement with NSD to obtain a Facility Dog.