

Frequently Asked Questions...

Am I eligible to become a Marin SAR K9 handler?

The eligibility requirements for the K9 team are the same as Marin County SAR requirements. However, while the entry age for Marin County SAR is 14 years of age, in order to be a K9 handler, you must be 18 years or older. This is a requirement as a member of a certifying agency like CARDA or WOOF and 18 years is their age requirement.

Is there an age limitation for becoming a K9 Handler?

There is no age limitation to become a K9 Handler. However, you must be in excellent physical condition. The minimum fitness requirement is an 8 mile hike with approximately 20 pounds of gear in your pack and a minimum elevation gain of 500 feet in three hours.

Do I have to be a Marin county resident to apply to the Marin SAR K9 Team?

Search is an emergency so time is of the essence. The closer you live to the search area the faster your response may be to an incident – especially when we are searching for someone at risk. Many times, minutes count. Besides your efficacy on a search, there are other advantages to living in Marin County while being part of the Marin County Search and Rescue team. The frequency of trainings means lots of driving if don't live nearby. When you're on the team, the callouts can happen any time during the day and night, so adding a long drive to the incident can be prohibitive. We are recruiting local handlers at this time so that the team can train with each other, learn together, and support each other.

How often to do I have to train and with whom?

In the early days of membership, you would train with us as a trainee on a fairly frequent basis for approximately three to six months. Our bi-weekly training sites are spread from Marin Headlands to Geyserville and Point Reyes to San Rafael. K9 SAR personnel will be evaluating your physical status, interest, and commitment, your dog's temperament and progress in training. During this time you will have an opportunity to work with other K9 handlers and get to know them. After this initial trainee period you may apply for apprentice membership with CARDA or WOOF. To become an apprentice, you will need to be sponsored by two active mission ready handlers, who will accept the responsibility of helping you become Mission Ready. Once you are Mission Ready, you will spend time and effort training new teams on their journey to becoming Mission Ready.

What kind of dog can I train for Search and Rescue?

We have found that many breeds of dogs are capable of doing SAR work, although most come from the working, herding, sporting, or hound lines. Dogs at the extreme ends of the size range, i.e., very small or very large, are probably not well suited for this work. The dog does not have to be a pure bred dog, though one advantage of a pedigreed dog is that you are able to look at the parents' temperament and working ability. Ultimately, it comes down to the individual dog's aptitude and drive. The potential search and rescue dog, whatever breed you choose, must be lean and athletic to withstand the rigors of searching.

Can any dog become a search dog?

A suitable canine candidate for search and rescue must have an interest in working, strong drive, focus, and a solid relationship with the handler. SAR K9's cannot have any fear or aggression issues with humans or other dogs. Some of the desirable attributes can be developed and some of this is inherent in each dog. If you don't have a dog at this time, please contact us to discuss how to evaluate a puppy for these characteristics.

Do I have to start with a puppy?

No. You may train an older dog for SAR; however, one of the advantages of training a puppy is that it will most likely have a longer working career. Many dogs retire when they are around 10 years of age, so if you start a four year old dog, and it takes you two years to become Mission Ready, you will only have four years of searching before the dog retires.

How long will the training take?

You should count on 1 1/2 to 2 years to train your dog and gain the skills you both need to become Mission Ready. During that time, if you are Mission Ready on the Marin SAR team you may respond to searches as ground personnel. Training does not stop when you become Mission Ready. We continue to train twice a week and attend monthly trainings. Many K9 teams continue their training to cross train and certify in other disciplines or specialties.

What skills will I need to learn?

Some of the skills required are the same skills required of Marin County SAR cadets – CPR, First Responder Certification, navigation skills, search skills, litter and low angle rope rescue, radio communications, man tracking and helicopter safety. K9 handlers also take classes in Scent Theory, unexpected night out and survival skills, and the basics of Incident Command protocol as a mutual aid resource.

What must I train my dog to do?

The training your dog receives will be somewhat dependent on whether it specializes as an area search dog or a trailing dog, but all the dogs learn to become independent problem solvers. They must be well socialized and obedience trained. They also need agility training so they can safely negotiate obstacles in the wilderness and disaster rubble. The dog must be able to swim.

How do I get this training?

As a member of Marin County SAR, many of the handler skills are part of the “bootcamp” introduction to search and rescue. These and other skills can also be attained through a certifying agency like CARDA (California Rescue Dog Association) or WOOOF (Wilderness Finders). There are community classes available in navigation, first aid, CPR, and rope rescue.

What is the test for Mission Ready certification?

The tests for trailing and air scent dogs follow CalEMA guidelines. The Trailing Dog Team Mission Ready test is a trail, 1 to 1 1/2 miles long, 12 - 15 hours old, and the dog must find the person in four hours. To become a Mission Ready Area Air Scent Team the team must first pass a Preliminary Evaluation which is a 40 acre test. The dog must find one, well hidden person in two hours. The Mission Ready Test is 100 - 120 acres; the dog must find an unknown number of people in four hours. The teams may also become Mission Ready certified in Avalanche, Cadaver, Water Search, and Disaster after they are Mission Ready in Air Scent or Trailing.

Is this time consuming?

Yes. Expect to train at least two times a week when you are starting out in our local group. As you attain your skills and sign offs you will be traveling to other parts of the state of California to workout with other K9 Teams and attend monthly workouts. When you and your dog are certified Mission Ready you will still be training on a regular basis and, in addition, you can expect phone calls in the middle of the night to respond to searches in Marin and throughout the state of California as mutual aid.

Is this expensive?

Yes, it can be expensive. We are all volunteer and do not accept any compensation for our labors. We buy our own uniforms and equipment and pay for our gas. Travel to and from training and searches can run over 10,000 miles a year. If you do not have backpacking equipment you will need to purchase this equipment before you are Mission Ready. The cost ranges from \$500 to \$1500 in the first two years. When Mission Ready we can respond to searches where we are expected to respond to a search equipped to be self-sufficient for up to three days.

Can my spouse/partner and I train the dog together?

Typically, there is one handler per dog, especially if you are just starting your career in Search and Rescue. The bond between the handler and dog is quite intense and important as they develop and advance towards Mission Ready status. If you have a partner or spouse who is interested in joining, they can apply to Marin Search and Rescue as a ground team member or apply to CARDA to become a Tech Support Mission Ready handler.

More questions?

Please feel free to contact the Marin Search and Rescue K9 Coordinator for further information or answers to your questions. Contact Karen Gideon via email her at karengideon@gmail.com and include your phone number and contact information.