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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY
VERMONT STATE POLICE
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March 18, 2025

Members of the Vermont General Assembly,

I write on behalf of the Vermont State Police to support the request of Vermont Criminal Justice Council (VCJC) Executive Director Christopher Brickell for an appropriation to fund a canine program head trainer/training coordinator. This position would facilitate foundational and in-service training for Vermont law enforcement agencies that employ canine teams.

In 2024, an assessment of the VCJC Canine Program was completed by The Gerlicher Group. The assessment's primary recommendation was to establish and fill a canine program head trainer/coordinator position at the Vermont Police Academy (VPA). Many of the additional recommendations are predicated on this role.

Presently, the VCJC has agreed to a short-term contract with Richard Slusser, a retired Vermont State Police (VSP) sergeant who served as the VSP Canine Unit coordinator for several years and as a longtime member of the VCJC Canine Committee. The short-term contract employs Sergeant Slusser to instruct a police canine patrol school and a police canine detection school, along with in-service training for the 2025 calendar year. Beyond this, no plans exist to ensure the availability of continued canine training through the VPA. From VSP's perspective, uncertainty about program continuity is problematic, hampering planning by individual agencies and potentially impeding implementation of the 2024 report recommendations.

VSP maintains perhaps the largest police canine unit in Vermont. For several years, VSP has adopted a rewards-based training model set forth by the New England State Police Administrators Compact (NESPAC). A shift to this model was made following an assessment of performance by agency canine teams, collaboration with subject-matter experts, identification of best practices in the field, and numerous discussions surrounding VPA training methodologies. Gerlicher Group assessors made the following note in their report: *"The VSP model is more innovative, and ultimately, more effective than that of the VPA."* Assessors also note that *"by unifying the training and certifications of the VPA and VSP, this would serve as a force multiplier not only for deployment of canine teams, but also to provide a larger pool of qualified instructors."*

Since July 2024, the VSP Canine Unit has utilized the NESPAC partnership for continued training with the Connecticut State Police (CSP). CSP maintains a world-renowned canine program, including training the world's first accelerant/liquid detection canine and the world's first electronic storage device detection canine. This partnership has allowed VSP's canine program to maintain high standards, but the collaboration also necessitates regular out-of-state travel.

The selection of Sergeant Slusser in the interim role has begun the process of reconciling the differences in training methodologies between VPA and VSP programs and in making progress toward realizing some of the 2024 recommendations. The concern we have relates to the lack of clarity surrounding a long-term solution. A partnership of the VSP and VPA canine programs may indeed have merit, but if there is no canine trainer at the VPA after 2025, VSP once again would find itself starting anew.

Currently, the VPA canine program supports the training needs of approximately 16 canine teams assigned to law enforcement agencies throughout Vermont. The present staffing challenges within Vermont law enforcement are well chronicled. The number of canine teams within Vermont has likewise declined in recent years. Ambiguity surrounding available canine training risks exacerbating this trend further.

Should the VPA option discontinue after 2025, other Vermont law enforcement agencies could follow VSP's lead and seek canine training from outside sources. However, training offered by the VPA likely is the most cost effective for Vermont agencies. At a time when all levels of governance are seeking cost efficiencies, a substantial increase in expenses to train police canines might result in agencies opting to discontinue their programs.

Police canine teams provide an integral, regularly deployed tool in advancing investigations, resolving critical incidents, and saving lives. Here are a few examples of recent VSP involvements:

- October 2024: Trooper Silva and canine Axel responded with other troopers from the Williston barracks attempting to locate a 32-year-old man wanted for aggravated assault in Huntington. Police learned the wanted person had entered a nearby residence without the homeowner's consent. As police cleared the residence, the wanted person ran into the woods, leaving behind belongings that included a .22 caliber handgun. The wanted person fled to a nearby bridge and refused to surrender. Instead, the man, who had a fixed blade knife sheath on his belt, crossed the river to escape. Canine Axel was deployed and successfully apprehended the man without further incident.
- December 2024: Trooper Hartman and canine Zeke responded during the overnight hours to a report of a missing person in Grand Isle. An 89-year-old woman, suffering from dementia and other medical conditions, had walked away from her home. Trooper Hartman and Zeke conducted a track and were able to locate the missing woman roughly a quarter mile from her home. This speedy resolution prevented potential medical complications by the missing woman.

- December 2024: Members of the VSP Tactical Services Unit, with canine support, were executing a search warrant to locate the suspect responsible for shooting St. Johnsbury Police Department Capt. Jason Gray. The suspect surrendered to tactical operators following an announcement that a police canine was going to enter the building. Upon exiting, the suspect told law enforcement officers he did not want to be bitten by the canine.

While this list is far from comprehensive, these examples illustrate the critical role police canines have in supporting law enforcement operations and promoting public safety. Police canines assist in deescalating tense situations, support apprehension of and accountability for violent criminals, and help accelerate locating missing, vulnerable individuals. There is little doubt that loss of this capability would hamper law enforcement operations across Vermont.

In summary, allocating funding to establish a permanent head trainer/coordinator for the VCJC canine program stands to benefit substantially Vermont law enforcement, particularly those agencies that employ police canines. The Vermont State Police endorses the allocation of an appropriation to the VCJC for this purpose.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Signed by:

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Major David Petersen
Field Force Commander
Vermont State Police