

Fire Department Gets New Nose

By Danny Wenger, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, January 24, 2007

Arson Investigator Jay Crippen has a new tool that can detect one drop of gasoline in a burned-down house.

The tool happens to be a 70-pound, yellow dog.

Pal, a 3-year-old "goldador," a mix of a golden retriever and Labrador retriever, is the Carbondale Fire Department's new detection dog. As a detection dog, he has been specially trained to find certain chemicals called accelerants.

"The key about this canine is he's a tool," Crippen said.

Pal is trained to "alert" when he smells an accelerant, a chemical like kerosene, used in starting a fire. When he alerts he stops walking, sits down and points to the area where he detects chemicals with his nose. After alerting, Pal is rewarded with food.

Crippen demonstrated one of the ways that he trains his dog, which he called "100 percent training." During this training, Crippen knows where chemicals have been placed.



Carbondale fire inspector Jay Crippen works his dog, Pal through a drill to find chemical accelerants Saturday morning at the City of Carbondale Fire Department on South Illinois Avenue. Pal is trained to detect several types of accelerants which helps Crippen in his investigation of arson. Media Credit: Anthony Souffle



Pal a detection dog for the City of Carbondale Fire Department watches as his handler Jay Crippen gets out accelerants before a training drill Saturday morning at the fire department on South Illinois Avenue. Media Credit: Anthony Souffle

"When we train at 100 percent, I will not reward him unless he's right on target," he said.

Pal obediently sat and waited at the end of the fire truck bay as Crippen placed drops of accelerant out of sight.

When he returned he put a green fanny pack around his waist and said, "Go to work."

Pal recognized the fanny pack and command as the signal that it was time to sniff out chemicals.

Crippen led him to one of the bay doors and tapped the ground repeating the

command "seek." Pal sniffed intensely along the base of the door. Hunched over as he tapped, Crippen's eyes were on the dog, watching his actions.

"It's a lot of back work," Crippen joked.

Suddenly Pal stopped and sat, glancing from his handler to the ground.

"Show me," Crippen said.

The dog bent his head and touched his nose to a spot on the concrete. Crippen repeated the command and the dog pointed again.

Pal had found one of the tiny drops of gasoline.

The dog heartily ate his reward directly from his handler's hand. With his tail wagging and looking eager to please, he continued his training.

Trust is important between the handler and canine during an investigation. Crippen builds trust in his dog using this drill because it shows when Pal alerts, it is on accelerants.

"He's a food reward dog," Crippen said.

Because of this, Pal is only fed during training. Crippen explained that some dogs are play reward and are given a toy for doing things like finding drugs.

"With arson dogs and bomb dogs you're not in a situation where you can play," he said.

Pal gets plenty of food though because he is trained three to five times a day.

"It's not starving your dog," Crippen said. "He eats more quantity of food stretched out throughout the day than my other two dogs I have at home."

Crippen has been with the fire department for five years. He saw the benefits of a detector dog working with the previous canine handler, Fire Chief John Michalesko and the previous dog, a chocolate-colored Labrador named Beau.

"I was around Beau, and I was there when Beau was running on fires," Crippen said. "So I got to see first hand the benefits of having an accelerant detection dog."

Carbondale received the new dog through a scholarship from State Farm Insurance. Crippen flew to Maine



Pal a detection dog for the City of Carbondale Fire Department gets a head scratch from handler Jay Crippen as the two spend time at the fire department on South Illinois Avenue. Media Credit: Anthony Souffle

where he trained with Pal at Maine Specialty Dogs. All the fees associated with dog and handler training was paid for by the scholarship.

Pal's food is paid for by the city, and his medical needs have been donated by a local animal hospital.

"He doesn't go through any more [food] than an average dog," Crippen said. "And Striegel Animal Hospital . . . they've donated for the ten years of Beau, and they're staying consistent with that with Pal here."

When investigating arson, samples are taken from the area to determine if an accelerant was used and then sent to a lab to be analyzed.

Michalesko said arson dogs reduce the time spent finding samples, and the samples are more accurate.

"The amount of time that they can save you, and their confirmation for samples, is a benefit to the department," Michalesko said.

Mayor Brad Cole, who introduced Pal at the Tuesday, Jan. 16 city council meeting, said having an arson dog helps the city by improving fire inspection.

"What it does is it allows us to provide a higher level of fire inspection and detection to be able to resolve an issue," Cole said. "If there's fire that's suspicious, we can come in with the dog, and detect these accelerants, and indicate whether or not there may be foul play involved."