

Project Unleashes Drug-Sniffing Dog

By Claudine San Nicolas, Staff Writer, Maui News, January 26, 2007

MAKAWAO – A dog's acute sense of smell could help rid Maui school campuses of illegal drugs, alcohol and firearms.

At least that's the hope of a pilot program being unleashed for the first time in Hawaii at Kalama Intermediate School, a campus plagued by numerous reports of alleged drug and alcohol use.

On Wednesday night, approximately 20 parents showed up for a briefing on the program at the school's cafeteria and to meet Custer, a 62-pound, male golden retriever.

The mild-mannered dog is trained and managed by its owner, Whitney White of Interquest Detection Canines of Hawaii. White's nonprofit agency will oversee the Kalama canine searches, paid for through private donations.



During the meeting with parents, White led Custer through a few areas in the cafeteria and a series of backpacks before he stopped and sniffed out a red backpack containing a sealed plastic bottle of vodka. Custer is trained to sniff out drugs, alcohol and abused medications as well as the scent of gun powder.

The dog will debut with Kalama students and faculty this morning during the school's homeroom period. It's the only time Custer will be expected by students. Future visits – to start within two weeks – will be unannounced.

"Hopefully that dog is not going to find anything," said Kalama PTSA President Nancy Findeisen. The mother of a 6th-grader at the school, Findeisen said she hopes parents will not resist the use of canines for drug searches at schools.

"All it says to me is we have our ducks in a row and we're proud to do this. We have nothing to hide," she said.

Kalama Principal John Costales said he wanted to take a proactive approach to drug abuse when he volunteered his school to be the first public school in Hawaii to participate in the pilot project.

"We, as a school and a community care about our children," Costales said. "We must do what we can stop the use and availability of alcohol and drugs on our campus and provide the necessary help and support to our students."

Three other Maui District campuses – Lahainaluna High, Lahaina Intermediate and Lanai High Elementary schools – are expected to participate in the pilot project, which runs through this summer.

The state Department of Education gave its approval to the program after providing input on policies and procedures. The schools are also required to submit their program plans to the state attorney general's office, which has approved Kalama's limited plan. State attorneys have not yet reviewed plans for the three other Maui schools.

The drug-sniffing dogs will search only Kalama School's restrooms, building exteriors and landscaping.

Costales said he's holding off locker searches until he gets approval from the attorney general's office.

The dogs won't be allowed to sniff people or personal property, such as backpacks and purses. Classrooms and vehicles will also be off-limits.

Leina Shirota-Purdy, the mother of a Kalama 6th-grader, said she believes the canine program will serve as a deterrent for drug abuse among students.

"I don't know why they didn't get this sooner," she said. "Just the fear of the dog being here I think could prevent (students from bringing drugs on campus), and it does give students an excuse not to try drugs."

Costales said the drug search is not aimed to target or discipline students suspected of drug use. However, Kalama officials are required by law to call police if illegal substances are found on campus.

White would not disclose Custer findings in previous search programs. Interquest Hawaii's current clientele includes two private schools on Oahu and several businesses and hotels on Maui.

According to White, the national franchise has been in business for 30 years and currently has canines in 1,200 school districts enrolling approximately 15 million students throughout the country.

Interquest's national statistics show a 70 percent drop in findings of illegal substances at schools in just the second year of canine program operations.

"That's the point. We don't want to find anything," White said.

Lahaina school comes up clean in drug sniffing

By Claudine San Nicolas, Maui News Staff Writer, February 14, 2007

LAHAINA – The Lahaina Intermediate School campus came up “clean” in its first-ever, drug-sniffing dog search, according to Principal Marsha Nakamura.

“The dog did not indicate anything, and I was very happy about that,” Nakamura said about an unannounced search conducted Feb. 7 at her campus on Lahainaluna Road.

Kalama Intermediate School in Makawao was the first Hawaii public school to participate in the pilot canine drug search program when it welcomed Interquest Detection Canines of Hawaii on to its campus last month.

Lahaina Intermediate and Lahainaluna High School are also participating pilot schools in the program. Officials at Lahaina Intermediate and Lahainaluna have been talking about the use of drug-sniffing dogs for more than a year.

Nakamura held a student assembly about the dog shortly before the 2006 Christmas break, but it wasn't until earlier this month that her school received official approval from the state Attorney General's Office for its plan to conduct the canine searches.

Nakamura wasted no time in calling on Interquest Detection Canines owner and operator Whitney White, and her golden retriever, Custer, to do the first search. White's nonprofit organization currently works in two private schools on Oahu and at several hotels and businesses on Maui.

Lahaina Intermediate joined Kalama in seeking to determine if there is a problem that school officials need to address. The Lahaina Intermediate search was done during school hours with students in the classrooms while the dog sniffed outside through restrooms, landscaping, school boundaries and the campus fence line.

“At least I know there is a clean environment for the kids,” Nakamura said Tuesday.

She said police were called earlier this year for multiple cases involving students caught with drugs and alcohol in their possession on campus. Like Kalama Principal John Costales, Nakamura said she does not believe students at her school are any more involved in substance abuse cases than at other public school campuses. However, both principals said they welcomed the program on their campuses as a deterrent to drug and alcohol abuse.

Lahainaluna High School Principal Mike Nakano has scheduled a drug-sniffing dog demonstration for his students for Feb. 21. A parent meeting will also be held that day at 5:30 p.m. He said he hopes to have the first unannounced dog search shortly after the briefings with students and parents.

Nakano said he found parents to be very supportive last November during an initial meeting on the use of the drug-sniffing dog. “They were willing to pay for it,” he said.

Interquest Detection Canines of Hawaii, a nonprofit organization, has received community contributions to support the searches in the public schools. To make a tax-deductible donation, call 281-7075.



Dog sniffs for drugs at 2 Maui schools but finds only spilled beer

By Alexandre Da Silva, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, February 16, 2007

Two Maui public schools that became the first in the state to allow a drug-sniffing dog on campus are praising the unannounced canine visits, saying it could benefit all island schools.

No substances were found by Custer, a 6-year-old golden retriever, at Kalama and Lahaina intermediate schools.

"It went really smoothly," said Lahaina Principal Marsha Nakamura, whose school has about 580 students. "I think it would be a great thing statewide. Influences from outside in our community, they do come into our schools. Nobody is really guaranteed to be safe."

Kalama Principal John Costales said because several organizations hold meetings at the school's cafeteria, dog searches can help ensure the campus is clean when about 930 sixth- through eighth-graders return to class on Mondays.

During the first search at Kalama on Feb. 1, the dog was able to smell alcohol from beer bottles that custodians found by the school's wood shop earlier that day. Custer made another surprise visit at the school on Tuesday. "It was amazing that he picked up that someone had spilled beer in that area," Costales said.

When the state Department of Education announced it would launch a pilot project to use dogs as a way to deter drugs, alcohol and firearms, the American Civil Liberties Union warned that the random searches could violate students' rights. But parent and student reaction to the program has been positive, the Maui principals said, adding they have not heard any privacy complaints.

The unannounced searches are allowed only in common areas like cafeterias, gymnasiums and bushes, with individual students, lockers, backpacks, purses and vehicles being off limits. The program should last a few more months, and there are no plans yet to expand it to other isle schools. "We are still in the evaluation stages. It would be a little early to talk too much on that," said department spokesman Greg Knudsen.

Other public schools planning to allow drug-sniffing dogs on campus are Lahainaluna High and Lanai High and Elementary. Hawaii and Alaska are the only two states in the nation lacking comprehensive dog-search programs at public schools, said Whitney White, owner of Interquest Detection Canines of Hawaii, which is running the pilot program on Maui.

The project does not cost the DOE money, and Interquest relies on donations to conduct the searches. The nonprofit agency, which conducts frequent dog-searches at the private Saint Louis School and the Academy of the Pacific on Oahu, would be ready to serve all Hawaii public schools if needed, Whitney said.



Custer, a drug-sniffing dog, was recently used at Kalama and Lahaina intermediate schools on Maui. He is shown here in a demonstration in which he found a bottle of gin in a locker.