

Dogs Help Fire Departments Save the Day as Arson Dogs

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It took the Allentown Fire Department in Allentown, Pennsylvania, about a year to add an accelerant detection dog to their team, but the eight-year-old yellow Lab named Judge was worth the wait. Since Judge started helping with arson investigations in Allentown, the number of arsons has dropped by more than half. In 2016, that feat helped him win the title of Arson Dog of the Year in the American Humane Hero Dog Awards.

The Allentown Fire Department is one of hundreds of agencies across the country that use accelerant detection dogs, informally called arson dogs. They assist with arson investigations that range from single-family homes to large wildfires, and the dogs' incredibly sensitive noses and specialized training make them invaluable to their agencies.

Judge came to the Allentown Fire Department in 2011 through the State Farm Arson Dog Program, which gives Labrador Retrievers to qualifying agencies free of charge and covers the costs of the joint training for the K-9s and their handlers. These dogs are so in demand that State Farm has a three-year waiting list, says Public Affairs Specialist Heather Paul, who serves as the program's national coordinator.

"I think as more and more departments see how this tool is used and understand the value, it's just going to increase," says Paul. "We're trying to make this type of tool available to as many different departments—police and fire departments—all

across North America, because we feel like this is one of the best ways to combat the amount of fraud and to prevent people from possibly dying from arson fires.”

Judge works alongside Fire Chief Lee Laubach, who calls his canine partner “an investigator, a deterrent, and an educator” and “the face of the Allentown Fire Department.” Laubach and Judge have worked together on 330 arson investigations and have put on more than 550 demonstrations for kids and adults. They also provide a fire safety program for children on the autism spectrum. (Some autistic individuals are fearful of people in uniform.)

People find Judge more approachable than the average police K-9 due to his breed’s friendly reputation and also because Laubach allows them to pet Judge when they make these kinds of appearances (which isn’t always the case with a police dog). It also helps that Judge is “happy-go-lucky” and “full of life,” says Laubach, who calls him “a typical Lab.”

No matter where Laubach takes Judge, the dog’s safety is his top concern. At a fire investigation, he closely examines the inside of the building to make sure the structure and the air are safe and that the floor temperature is below 110 degrees. Laubach won’t take Judge into a building with a meth lab because the chemicals can burn his nose, but because it’s possible for Judge to be exposed to other drugs, such as opioids, Laubach carries Narcan, a medication that blocks opioids’ effects.

Next, the fire chief and his canine partner search the building. If Judge finds an accelerant, he sits down and points with his nose so that Laubach can mark the spot and the investigator can take a sample. Before the sample is sent to the crime lab, Judge will do a “confirmation sniff” to ensure that it was taken from the correct area (and not, for example, from materials *on top* of an object containing the potential accelerant).

Afterward, Laubach thoroughly cleans Judge and checks for injuries by washing his paws and body and taking him to the fire station for a bath and physical safety check.

Arson dogs like Judge are more accurate than humans and even better than special accelerant detection equipment. Laubach recalls one instance—an investigation at a house where a fire had broken out on the first floor—that illustrates this well.

“[Judge] actually alerted on something on the second floor, right by a window, and me being a new handler I thought, ‘OK, I don’t know what he’s alerting to here.’ But I put a marker down, took him out—and he had actually found two bottles that were

partially filled with gasoline that they got partial prints off of,” says Laubach. “Being an investigator without a dog, you would have never even found those,” he says.

Besides helping to solve crimes, arson dogs save their departments money, too. While human investigators may take 10 to 20 samples to send for testing, “An arson dog can go through a fire scene and pinpoint exact locations where they detect accelerants, so you’re taking fewer samples,” says Paul. “The likelihood of it coming back as an accelerant . . . is extremely high.”

Law enforcement officers aren’t the only ones who know about arson dogs’ precision—criminals do, too. “Oftentimes just the mere presence of an arson dog will result in a confession,” says Paul. Still, she stresses that each dog works as part of a team. “We reinforce that the [dog] is not there to replace human investigators,” she says. “It is there to be a tool and resource for them.”

The State Farm Arson Dog Program is just one of the training programs in the U.S. for accelerant detection dogs. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives runs a training center, as does the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services (DHSES), which trains dogs at the New York State Academy of Fire Science in Montour Falls. Like State Farm, it has a waiting list full of police and fire departments (from New York as well as other states and Canada) who want their own arson dogs.

While police K-9s typically come from breeders in the U.S. and Europe, many accelerant detection K-9s are former shelter dogs. Mike Knowlton, a fire investigator in the Office of Fire Prevention and Control within the DHSES, regularly looks for adoptable dogs to train, even considering those who don’t make good family pets. Knowlton searches sites like Petfinder and Adopt-a-Pet, visits various New York shelters, and makes phone calls to find good candidates—mostly Labrador Retrievers, other Retrievers, and Retriever mixes.

Knowlton says he looks for happy dogs who are good with people and love to play—but not *too* active. (No “Tasmanian devils,” he says.) The shelters Knowlton works with know what he’s looking for, he says, so the staff set aside potential dogs before his visits.

One reliable source of arson dogs has been Lollypop Farm, the Humane Society of Greater Rochester, which has provided 40 dogs over the years. Many of them were hard to place in adoptive homes because of their boisterous behavior.

“Whenever I get Mike’s call, I go down to our behavior department and say, ‘Mike

called!’ and everybody gets all excited, because [it means] a really, really positive outcome for a dog that on the surface looks like he’s not going to have a positive outcome,” says Gillian Hargrave, vice president and chief operating officer at Lollypop Farm. “It demonstrates the untapped potential of any animal in a shelter, dogs especially.”

Hargrave and the other staff find it gratifying to see the once-homeless dogs take on such an important role. “To watch these dogs have so much fun [in training] and have a handler that loves them and treats them well, it makes you feel great. Everyone’s in their element,” says Hargrave. “And an added benefit is that we’re actually providing a service to a fire department, a valuable service—and they have the potential to save lives.”