Finding a home for our nation’s search dogs

Next month’s 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks will rightfully be a somber occasion to remember those lost and honor the sacrifices to keep us safe made by so many since that fateful day. But the day will also mark a new beginning for our nation’s search dogs, who are seeking out their first-ever permanent home for training.

The years-long journey toward training more search dogs, and establishing a permanent national training center, is due to the grit and determination of a 60-something retired schoolteacher.

In April 1995 Wilma Melville and her black Labrador Retriever search dog, Murphy, rushed to the site of the terrorist bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

At that time they were one of only 15 Advanced Certified disaster search dog-handler teams in the United States, and that glaring need made Melville determined to find a way to train highly skilled canine teams. So in 1996 she founded the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation.

Since then NDSDF has worked with more than 50 shelters and breed rescue groups to train hundreds of dogs. The organization has deployed teams to more than 70 disasters, including the earthquake and tsunami in Japan; last year’s earthquake in Haiti, where teams rescued a dozen buried victims; and a wide range of disasters, from tornadoes and mudslides to building explosions and train derailments.

Despite the progress, it is estimated that more than 450 teams are needed to mount an adequate disaster response, and currently there are half that number.

The foundation is raising money to build the nation’s first National Training Center on a 125-acre site in the foothills of Santa Paula, Calif. The center will train search teams for deployment around the nation. On Sept. 11 foundation supporters will gather to honor those who perished, to recognize the incredible work of the K9 teams and support staff, and to formally launch construction.

Why is a permanent site needed?

“When our search teams respond to disasters they encounter extreme conditions and terrifyingly challenging search scenarios,” Melville says. “To be fully prepared for anything they may encounter in their effort to save lives, the teams need to train in an environment that simulates these conditions.”

But right now the teams train on temporary piles of rubble, mostly found at recycling centers. There are three problems with this:

- The training piles are only there until the concrete debris or lumber scraps are needed for another purpose. The teams constantly must locate new sites, sometimes hundreds of miles away.
- The search scenarios are static and unchanging, so the dogs get used to the same search configuration.
- The temporary rubble piles don’t challenge the teams enough. “In Haiti our teams found people buried under 15 feet of concrete,” Melville says. “We need to be able to bury ‘victims’ at least that deep. We need simulated mudslides, collapsed buildings, rock piles that change configuration and accommodate deep victim searches.”

The foundation has raised funds to begin construction, thanks to grants from contributors such as Joanne Woodward Newman and the Newman’s Own Foundation. But millions more will be needed to complete the complex, which will cost an estimated $14.5 million.

Adding new teams also presents financial challenges. In 2011 the foundation will train 21 new teams, at a cost of $15,000 per team, all from funds raised, at no cost to taxpayers or the government.

“After 9/11, donations from people all over the country helped launch the search dog foundation,” Melville says. “The nation responded once, and I believe they’ll do it again.”

To find out more about the foundation visit www.ndsdf.org — Ernie Slone