

Rescue Dogs Get Disaster Training In Tulsa

Lacie Lowry, News On 6
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TULSA, Oklahoma -- Oklahoma Task Force One, one of the state's urban search and rescue teams, now has four new canines and handlers trained to find survivors in disasters.

"They can search an area so much faster. They can cover an area in 15 minutes where it might take a human team hours," Judy Zinn, a canine handler, said.

The dogs have their own survival stories. They are all rescues from animal shelters that were close to euthanasia when opportunity stepped in.

Trainer Plus Davern, with the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, which donated the dogs to Oklahoma, puts the dogs through agility exercises so they can scale and balance on any surface.

"They are asked to work in very difficult places so we have dogs that are willing to go anywhere, that have a lot of drive," Davern said.

Verbal cues help the dog and its handler develop their own language.

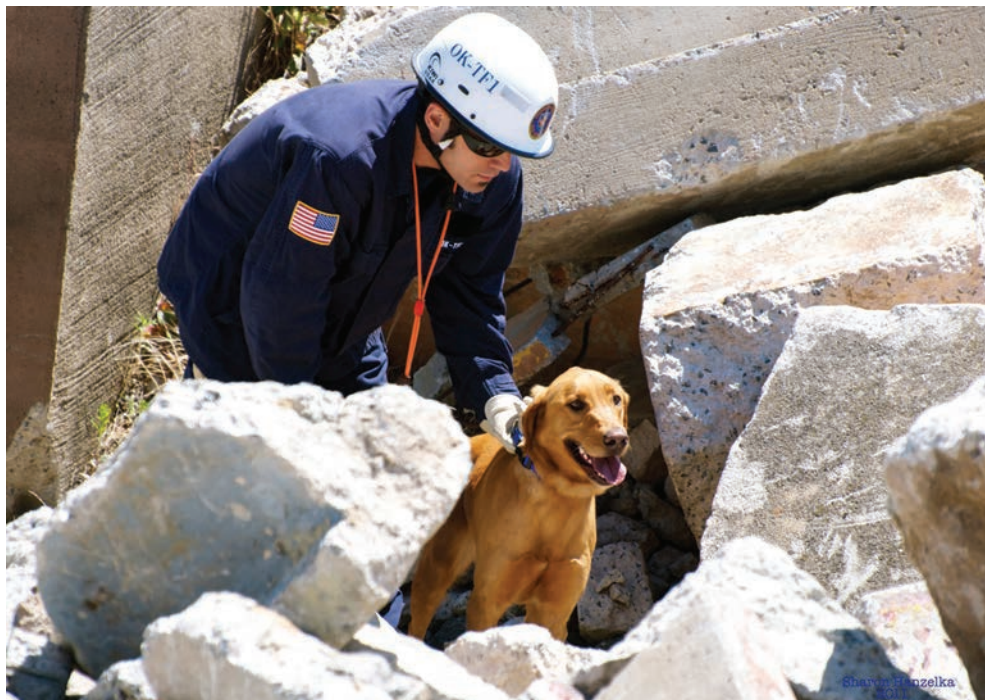
"It's like you learn to communicate with a person because they read your body, you read theirs and you learn to work as a team," Vincent Stoops, a handler, said.

The dogs are only trained to find live, human scents so they are often the first line of rescue in natural disasters.

"You're the first person on scene that can make a difference and actually get to that victim before anybody else does," Stoops said.

"It is absolutely the best tool for finding people that we cannot see, even with all the modern technology that we have," Davern said.

The new canine handlers left May 22, 2011, for California to get their dogs and train. The Joplin tornado hit later that day so they weren't part of rescue missions, but say they'll be ready the next time.



Search Dog Justice in training with his handler Jeff Leon.

Photo by Sharon Hanzelka



New OK TF One handlers and their Search Dogs from l to r: Jeff Leon & Justice, Judy Zinn & Royce, Vincent Stoops & Magnum, Adrienne Seibel & Danni

Photo by Sharon Hanzelka

"The ability to search in Joplin and Oklahoma City and to find victims – there is no price tag on that," Zinn said.

The four new canine teams will continue their training and should all be certified in six months.