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Volunteers, dogs help find the missing

HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN, Reformer Staff

Monday, August 13 BELLOWS FALLS -- When Lt. Jocelyn Stohl, station commander of the Vermont State Police Rockingham barracks, took over the search for a missing Ascutney man last week, there were many decisions to make. Stohl had to weigh whether to send a dive team into the waters of the Bellows Falls Canal, risking the divers' safety against the slight chance that Ernest Harper, the missing man, might have fallen in.

She coordinated a press conference to get the word out about Harper's disappearance and got the information on a national data base, all while trying to put the pieces together of what happened to him.

But one decision that came easily to Stohl was knowing who to call when it was time to bring in a search dog team.

For the past 26 years, the Vermont State Police have used the **New England K-9 Search & Rescue Team**, a group of volunteers who are spread throughout Vermont and New Hampshire. The handlers pay all their own expenses, own their dogs and donate every minute of their time. They are on call 24 hours a day, and the group averages more than a search a week throughout the year, sometimes conducting searches in New England's harshest weather and most demanding terrain.

"The state police do not have the funds to support a search team and this group is available to the people of New Hampshire and Vermont," Stohl said about the group. "They have some of the highest standards in the country."

New England K-9 Search & Rescue was founded in 1981 and maintains between 15 and 20 members who live throughout New Hampshire and Vermont.

They are able to send six to 10 certified handlers with their dogs for each call and the teams are on the road within 15 minutes of the initial communication.

When Harper was reported missing in Bellows Falls, five dog-handler teams searched the area, mostly in the vicinity of the canal.

Lucy Newton, who lives in South Londonderry, was there with her dog, Dugan.

Newton joined the New England team five years ago, after moving to Vermont from Ithaca, N.Y., where she worked for a volunteer search team for about four years.

All of the dog handlers own their dogs, so it is a requirement that a searcher be a dog-lover, Newton said.

But handlers must also be in good physical shape, and they have to enjoy being outside, which might include hot and humid days in the 90s, as well as dangerous winter conditions.

"All of us are outdoors people who like to be in the woods with our dogs," she said. "I got involved because I always liked working with and training dogs, and I wanted to do something useful and productive."

She loves the physical work, and she loves being outside with her dog, but one of the major challenges is financing her activity. With gas prices so high, Newton said it can be hard to find the extra cash to fill the tank when she has to drive around New England to help out with searches. "I've stopped keeping track, because I don't want to know," she said. "It's a big investment, financially."

The dogs in **New England K-9** Search & Rescue are trained to pick up any human scent in a controlled area, and they often work without a scent of the missing person. They might look for a child who wandered away from a family campground, a person that was reported missing or an elderly man who became confused.

On July 6, they uncovered the body of a 59-year-old man from Claremont, N.H. who went missing in a wooded area.

On Aug. 4, they helped find a 64-year-old man in Wolfeboro, N.H. who was returned alive. "You want to be successful every time, whether you are looking for someone who is living or not," Newton said. "You go through periods where you are not getting much sleep, but it is rewarding. It always surprises you a little bit when you find what you are looking for."

Nancy Lyon, who is the president and operational leader of the team, said each search is tightly organized, with the handlers maintaining contact with each other and with the law enforcement agency that is heading the search.

Sometimes they are searching for someone who is lost, other times they are hunting someone who is trying to evade capture.

Both the dogs and the handlers have to pass a test, which usually comes after 18 months of training.

The teams work together, with the handlers understanding maps and communication while the dogs use their scent of smell that humans can never achieve.

"In Bellows Falls, we didn't just open the door of the car and say, 'Go find Ernie,'" said Lyons. "Dogs can't read maps or drive cars. It is a team and they work together."

And Lyons said along with a love of dogs and the outdoors, it is important to maintain a good attitude.

"Yes, it is taxing. Yes, it is worrisome, especially with children. On the other hand, this is what we are trained to do," Lyon said. "When it all comes together, you can be very proud, but nobody always finds everybody."