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HEROIC DOGS, A DECADE LATER

The following information was released by the University of Pennsylvania:

After the attacks of 9/11, the heroism of first responders - firefighters, police officers, EMTs, rescue workers and more - became a source of hope and inspiration in a trying time. But one group of responders has remained relatively unsung: 9/11's working dogs.

Though they are mostly owned by volunteer handlers and privately trained, an estimated 900 dogs were involved in the 9/11 response. They searched for survivors and human remains, patrolled with police officers and comforted both victims and rescue workers.

Cynthia Otto, assistant professor of critical care at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine, saw the heroism of these dogs first hand. Otto was deployed with the Pennsylvania Urban Search and Rescue team, which consists of firefighters, medics, engineers and other specialists. Though the team did not officially have a slot for a veterinarian, Otto made the case that the team's four search-and-rescue dogs needed just as much medical care as the people that would be handling them.

When Otto arrived at Ground Zero the evening of Sept. 12, 2001, she was one of the first veterinarians on site. Working the next five night shifts, she helped care for many of the 300 working dogs on-site.

While the search-and-rescue dogs were not able to find survivors, some of the best support the dogs provided was emotional rather than physical.

"The only time the rescue workers smiled was when they were able to connect with the dogs," Otto said. "That was absolutely incredible to see."

Over the intervening decade, Otto has been conducting a first-of-its-kind survey study on the longitudinal health impacts associated with the working dogs of 9/11. Collecting information from yearly checkups on 95 of the dogs, many of which she met while at Ground Zero, Otto and her colleagues are comparing them to a control group of 55 search-and-rescue dogs that did not work on 9/11.

The results have been surprisingly positive. Though responders expected the 9/11 working dogs to have higher incidence of respiratory problems and cancer, their rates remain comparable to the control group.

Otto and her colleagues are still closely monitoring the dogs' immune function - the most notable difference between the groups was a spike in immune response in the working dogs for a year after 9/11 - but the prevailing sense is that working dogs may actually live longer, healthier lives than dogs simply kept as pets.

"The median lifespan for the working dogs in the study was about 12 years, which is a very long life for these larger breeds. And factoring out the dogs who died prematurely due to trauma, the number is even higher," Otto said. "Having a job and being so mentally and physically engaged might improve these dogs' lives."

The longitudinal study will continue for rest of the remaining 13 dogs' lives, though Otto suspects there are many more 9/11 dogs that have never been contacted. Because of the chaos in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, and the fact that working dog handlers are mostly volunteers, there are no comprehensive records of the dogs

In an effort to rectify this, Otto is working with the non-profit group Tails of Hope and its Finding One Another program, on a working dog memorial project. Beyond raising money for working dog programs and research, Otto will travel with the group to Liberty State Park in New Jersey which overlooks the former site of the World Trade Center on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 to recognize the work of the dogs and veterinarians who were so vital to the response. In addition, in the future she will join Finding One Another in a special ceremony to dedicate a registry of the dogs and handlers who took part in the response.

Otto is the director of the Penn Vet Working Dog Center, which studies health, behavior and genetics in an effort to discover what makes certain dogs more suited to working tasks than others. The center hopes to build a training and research facility on Penn's campus to provide working dogs and their handlers with a more rigorous understanding of this under-studied field.

"Only then can we make these dogs more successful and more accessible, as well as provide adequate support to the people who work with them," Otto said.

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