

Puppy Evaluations

It's a bright weekday morning in July as Andy and Steve, the trainers for CIA's fall puppy class, exit interstate 81 onto a two-lane country road in Pennsylvania, rambling past green hills of pastureland and corn, farm houses gleaming in the sunlight, and old barns stubbornly standing against a strong summer breeze.

They're headed to Susquehanna Service Dogs in Pennsylvania to evaluate seven Labrador Retrievers as possible candidates for our upcoming puppy class. Officers from Fredrick County Fire Marshal and Fairfax County Police Department in Virginia accompany the trainers, hoping to pick out a puppy for their respective units.

As one of the largest K9 Explosives Detection programs in the Washington Metropolitan Area, and the first United States Police Canine Association (USPCA)-certified "Detector Training Center" in the country, CIA often trains dogs for local law enforcement. We also provide ongoing training, evaluations, and certification for local and federal agencies, including FBI and State Department.

What are CIA Dog Trainers Looking For?

For our Fall 2017 "Puppy Class," we need to find six dogs in total, four for CIA and one each for Frederick and Fairfax counties. The "puppies" range anywhere from 8 months to 2 1/2 years old and are almost always dogs that are being released from service dog programs. Our instructors visit several different organizations throughout the region—such as Susquehanna Service Dogs and Puppies Behind Bars—to test potential puppies a few weeks before a new class begins.

Like many explosives detection programs, we use Labrador Retrievers because of their non-stop energy, friendly demeanor, and love of food. Our program uses positive training methods only, and the dogs are trained using food rewards, so a strong food drive and a high level of energy are extremely important.

Susquehanna, which raises and trains services dogs to assist children and adults with disabilities to become more independent, intimately knows the personalities of each puppy in its program. Many of the dogs are born at Susquehanna, while others enter the program at 8 weeks of age.

Susquehanna's puppies are raised by volunteer puppy raisers for the first year, and then the dogs enter Susquehanna's advanced training program for service dog work. Usually, by the time the dogs are between 1 1/2 to 2 years old, Susquehanna knows whether or not the dog will make it as a service dog. Not all dogs make the cut.

"If we're releasing a dog, it's usually because of health reasons or temperament," says Pam Foreman, Director of Susquehanna Service Dogs. "Temperament could be a number of things. It could be that they are really barky, or maybe they are easily distracted by smells, or maybe they are just too high strung for the type of work we need them for. The dogs we use have to be energetic, but it has to be a specific kind of energy. They have to really want to work – opening and shutting doors, turning on and off lights, retrieving things – or maybe just always be attentive to that veteran with PTSD by always looking for those signs of anxiety. But it's not an over-the-top kind of energy."

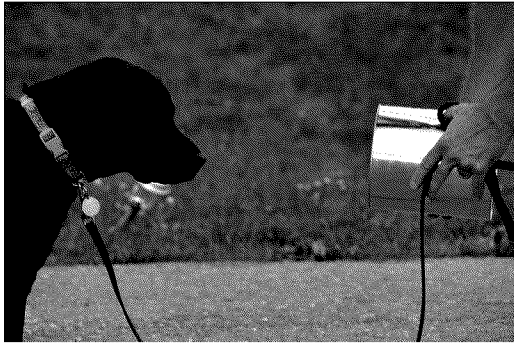
That over-the-top, impossible to turn off energy is exactly what our CIA trainers, Andy and Steve, are looking for. So when a dog gets released from a program like Susquehanna, they now have another place to go.

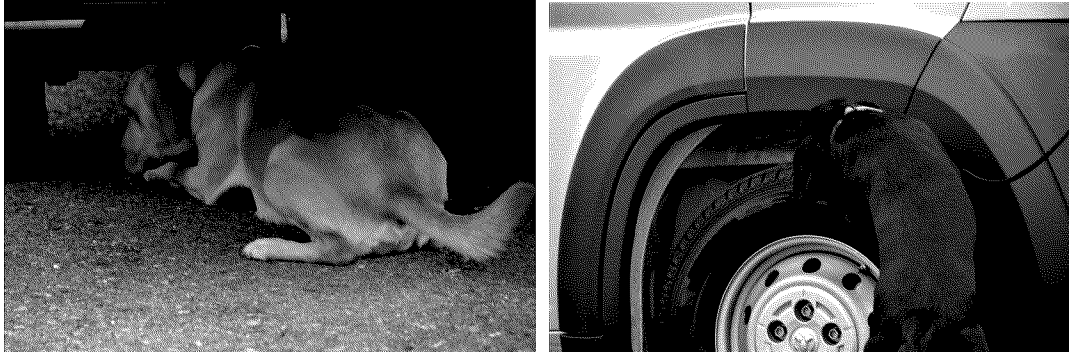
“In the beginning,” says Foreman, “some of our puppy raisers were a little apprehensive because they knew working at the CIA was a job that could be dangerous for the animal, and they wanted their dog to succeed at being a service dog. That’s why they do this. But now people are proud that their dog, the dog they helped to raise and train, can go on and do great things for the country.”

Evaluations at Susquehanna:

The seven puppies Susquehanna is releasing from the program are six females: Lulu, Freya, Axel, Indigo, Heide, and Suni (pronounced “Sunny”); and one male, Armstrong.

Andy and Steve, with the help of another CIA K9 instructor, run a series of tests to see how the seven pups react to various situations they might encounter during training or later on the job:





Our K9 instructors evaluate and score each dog. Once they've visited and evaluated all of the dogs in the different programs under consideration for this fall's puppy class, the entire CIA training staff will meet to discuss all the dogs they've seen over the past few weeks. They'll chose the dogs with the highest combined scores to join the program.

What's next for the pups? Before classes can start, the puppies need to visit the veterinarian for a full health exam and any remaining vaccinations.

If you miss any of the articles in this series, visit "Follow CIA's New Puppy Class!" main page, where we are chronicling the puppies' progresses over the next 16-weeks.