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LAWC & LSP Encourage Canine Encounter Training

By Heather Wright (KTVE/NBC) – May 12, 2014

(BATON ROUGE, LA) -- Unhappy endings when it comes to officers and dogs have been highly publicized in recent years. Just last week, a Sulphur, Louisiana police officer resigned after he shot and killed a young labrador mix, which a witness called unprovoked. The Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's office is investigating the incident. Now, the Louisiana Animal Welfare Commission is partnering with Louisiana State Police to help first responders understand their encounters with canines.

The day-long seminar, led by Jim Osorio, teaches officers and first responders less lethal techniques when it comes to handling dogs. The seminar was open and free to those agencies that signed up. Osorio says, "Automatically, a lot of them say, oh my gosh, it's a dog. I'm gonna get bit. I want to try and break that." He says the first step is understanding body language, as dogs are often misjudged. "Their body language is gonna tell you whether there's gonna be a confrontation or not. If the dog is just standing there and he's not barking, the hair's not gonna be up or anything like that, pretty much he's probably not gonna bite. But if he's got the hair up and he's barking and growling and snarling, the officer needs to step back for a second and figure out what he's gonna do before he approaches the situation," Osorio said.

At the seminar, Louisiana State Police Colonel Mike Edmonson told KTVE 10 News, he hopes officers will share this knowledge with their peers. "It's a perfect opportunity to put another tool in your tool box as a police officer on how to deal with and interact with animals. They're protective of an area. If you go into a home where a dog is, you gotta understand that's that dog's home. They're gonna protect that and you have to understand that. Knowing up front and dealing with that certainly helps you a lot." Edmonson said.

Two Union Parish officers were among those at the workshop. Union Parish Sheriff Dusty Gates said, "Dog complaints are becoming a tremendous problem for the department. We've answered more than 1,000 complaints in the last three years."

In his workshop, Osorio shows how his service dog, a german shepherd named Coral, can even be

perceived as aggressive. He puts her on a leash and she begins to bark. Osorio then releases her and she roams around the packed room looking for the occasional pat on the head and treat, before settling down on the floor for another nap.

Hilton Cole, a member of the Louisiana Animal Welfare Commission (LAWC), describes communication between officer and canine as complicated. Cole said, "Police officers are trained to be an authority, to take charge of the situation and the dog is doing the same thing. This is his property, he's in charge of it and the two clash. A whole department can get painted negatively after years of good work by one bad incident with an animal."

Osorio is scheduled to host workshops for The Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Department on August 21st and 22nd.