



NEWS FROM
ULSTER COUNTY
County Executive Jen Metzger

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Dedicated Therapy Dog Support Program Announced for Ulster County Emergency 911 Operators

PROGRAM IS FIRST OF ITS KIND IN NEW YORK STATE

KINGSTON, NY - The Ulster County Department of Emergency Services announces the implementation of its Therapy Dog Program specifically dedicated to supporting public safety telecommunicators in the Division of Emergency Communications (911). This initiative marks the first dedicated therapy dog program for a 911 call center in New York State.

The program aims to provide emotional support and stress relief to public safety telecommunicators who routinely handle high-pressure emergency situations. The therapy dog will also be available to assist the broader first-responder community throughout Ulster County.

The therapy dog, an 8-week-old Goldendoodle named Oliver, will be completing specialized training and American Kennel Club (AKC) certifications to work in the emergency services environment. Oliver was purchased from Lakeshore Doodle in Kendal, N.Y., and is being trained by Certified K9 Services in Pulaski N.Y., an organization with extensive experience in training therapy dogs for specialized environments. Oliver will maintain a regular schedule at the 911 center and be available for critical incident stress management following particularly challenging calls or events.

“We are thrilled to launch this innovative program, which will provide a unique form of support and comfort to our emergency telecommunicators and first responders, who handle incredibly stressful situations every day,” **said Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger.** “I want to thank Ulster County Emergency Services Director Everett Erichsen, as well as Deputy County Executive Jamie Capuano, for recognizing and working to implement this positive

initiative in support of the mental health and well-being of our emergency services personnel."

"Our 911 telecommunicators are the first, first responders. They handle traumatic calls daily while maintaining composure and professionalism," **said Everett Erichsen, Ulster County Director of Emergency Services.** "This program recognizes the emotional toll of this critical work and provides a proven method for reducing stress and improving mental wellbeing."

Research shows that interaction with therapy animals can significantly reduce stress hormones, lower blood pressure, and improve overall mental health. These benefits are particularly valuable in high-stress environments like emergency communications centers.

"The mental health of our emergency personnel is just as important as their technical training," **said Andrew Cafaldo, Deputy Director/911 Coordinator.** "This therapy dog program represents our commitment to supporting the whole person behind the headset."

Anthony McKenzie, a Public Safety Telecommunicator for 17 years with the Ulster County Department of Emergency Services, has been selected as the therapy dog handler and has been receiving comprehensive training in several key areas, including peer support training, resiliency training, and critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) training.

This specialized training ensures Dispatcher McKenzie is equipped with the skills to provide effective support during high-stress situations and traumatic events. The combination of peer support and resiliency training enables him to assist colleagues through difficult situations while promoting mental wellness practices. CISM training further prepares Dispatcher McKenzie to help telecommunicators process traumatic events in healthy ways, preventing long-term psychological impact.

The Ulster County Emergency Communications Center answers a total of 120,071 incoming calls annually, of which 67,477 are Emergency (911) Calls. This amounts to an average of 329 calls per day, highlighting the significant volume and pressure faced by public safety telecommunicators who will benefit from this support program.

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