

Meet Otis, the Woodbury Police Department's K-9 partner for calm in crisis

He's one of two therapy dogs in Washington County trained to respond to public safety calls, and also helps lessen first responders' stress.

By [Matt McKinney](#) Star Tribune

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Detective Adam Sack and his canine partner Otis, a therapy dog, spent time together at the Public Safety Building in Woodbury on Nov. 10. The Woodbury Police Department uses Otis as part of a larger effort within policing to find alternatives to handcuffs and an arrest when dealing with people in crisis.

Everyone in the Woodbury Police Department knows that if you give this one officer a high five, he's likely to return it — but what he really wants is a Milk-Bone.

Any flavor.

Trained to sit with people in crisis, Otis the therapy dog reports for duty with Woodbury police detective Adam Sack. The English golden retriever rides in Sack's unmarked squad car, wears a blue vest, and has gone out on numerous calls since he joined the department last year.

"It really lightens the situation when we take him out," said Sack.

Sack often partners with Angie Shackleton, a Washington County social worker embedded with the Woodbury Police Department, and along with Otis they look for ways to help people struggling with mental illness, homelessness or a crisis in their lives.

There's no typical day, but Sack said he'll listen to the radio scanner for calls that might be appropriate for Otis. He's also ready to respond when patrol officers ask for assistance or from other agencies within Washington County, such as Washington County Child Protection.

Otis makes public appearances at community events, and his mission continues inside the public safety building, where he's free to wander, said Sack. If any public safety staff, officers, or firefighters need some time to decompress after a harrowing call, Otis is always up for a game of fetch with the toys scattered near Sack's desk. He likes to lie on a spot not far from Sack's desk where he can see people coming and going.



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Det. Adam Sack plays with his canine partner Otis the therapy dog and Lucy the Westie inside at the Public Safety Building in Woodbury, Minn., on Tuesday, Nov. 14, 2023.

The department got Otis as a six-week-old puppy on Christmas Eve 2021, from Goldfeather Run, a breeder and trainer of golden retrievers in Richfield. Otis completed an obedience program at Animal Inn in Lake Elmo and then took more classes in preparation for therapy work.

He wasn't a certified therapy dog until passing an hourlong examination with a certifier from Pet Partners, a Bellevue, Wash.,-based organization that has championed the use of therapy animals since the 1970s.

"There were a bunch of exercises he had to complete," said Sack, from showing obedience to staying calm while being exposed to different sounds, other dogs and other people.

In his nearly two years on the job, Otis has helped with more than 75 community events and assisted on 136 calls in the field.

Otis, who lives with Sack's family, was paid for with donations from the Woodbury Police K9 Fund, a Woodbury nonprofit. The group was founded by Donna Stafford in appreciation of the Woodbury emergency responders after the 2014 death of her husband, Bruce, who had been a paramedic, firefighter and fire chief.



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Kim Kemen, who has treats in her cube, is visited by Otis the therapy dog inside the Public Safety Building in Woodbury, Minn., on Tuesday, Nov. 14, 2023.

Otis is the second therapy dog in Washington County following Rookie, a yellow lab who started working with Washington County Sheriff's Office Det. Matt O'Hara in July 2021.

"Once we started looking at the possibility of a therapy dog in the Sheriff's Office, we said: 'It's a no brainer,' " O'Hara said. "A lot of people have a natural connection to dogs or animals and [Rookie] is an excellent tool to open up that line of communication. They might not want to talk about what's bothering them today, but they can hang out with Rookie and we can go from there."

O'Hara said he and Rookie were called in once to help officers who were trying to talk to a young person with autism who had stuffed himself under his bed and wouldn't come out. The deputies had to talk to the boy because he had been aggressive with his family, but it wasn't until O'Hara mentioned that he could bring Rookie into the boy's room that things changed.

"I brought Rookie up to the bedroom, and by the time we got there the [boy] had begun climbing out from under the bed," said O'Hara. Rookie and O'Hara have since returned to the boy's house several times for follow-up visits.

Unlike other law enforcement canines trained in apprehending people or detecting drugs, Rookie and Otis do therapy work exclusively, allowing strangers to come close and knowing how to stay calm.

O'Hara said other law enforcement agencies in Minnesota and beyond have reached out asking about Rookie as they consider launching their own therapy dog program.

"It's a very low-impact tool that we have in the Sheriff's Office, but she's able to have a major impact on people that are struggling," said O'Hara.