



By Jen Reader

# Friends to First Responders

Labs trained by the nonprofit Service Dogs, Inc. help our heroes.

When a yellow Lab named Lady arrived near the scene of the 2019 mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, the mood was understandably somber. Lady's handler, Frankie Trifilio, recalls walking into the law enforcement command post where tactical officers were reconstructing the crime scene with video surveillance to piece together what had just happened.

"Everybody had their job. They had their heads down," he says.

But as Lady and two other Emergency Services Facility Dogs started visiting with the first responders, things started to change. One initially stoic SWAT officer learned Lady was there in case he needed a break; he got down on the floor to rub her belly, cooing baby talk to her. Others soon followed suit.

"Lady loves belly rubs, and she was belly up, paws up, being available to anybody and everybody," Trifilio says. "There were officers smiling and laughing. Conversations started, and by the time we left, the room was different. It was a collaborative working environment."

Unlike many Labs, Lady doesn't fetch and hates water. She can act prim and proper at times. But she does have the special trait shared by all Labs: the inherent ability to bring smiles to faces – even during a crisis.

Lady uses that skill daily in her work as an Emergency Services Facility Dog for the Methodist Healthcare System in San Antonio, Texas. She and Trifilio, an emergency medical services (EMS) relations manager and part-time EMT, visit with doctors, nurses, social workers, paramedics, and other staff as well as firefighters and police officers to offer stress relief – work that has become increasingly important during the coronavirus pandemic.

"Many of the things we encounter on the job are things that most people should never see," Trifilio says. "We wanted to do more: We wanted to develop a resiliency program to reach out to our staff and the first responders before they got to a point where they were burned out, before they got to a point where they wanted to retire early, or worse – we were recognizing the percentage of suicide rates in first responders increasing quite rapidly."

Lady and the two other dogs on the team – Fresca, also a yellow Lab, and Chanel, a Lab/golden cross – started work for the hospital system in 2018 and haven't slowed down. All of the hospitals treat COVID-19 patients, and often seeing one of the dogs is the only break the staff might have between patients.

"They light up – their faces just change when they see these dogs," Trifilio says. "After a few minutes of play



Frankie and Lady.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROMAN BAKERS



PHOTO COURTESY OF SERVICE DOGS INC.

Lady taking a break.

“

Everybody likes Labs – they look so friendly. They’re an All-American dog. So they’re already making things better just because they are a Lab.”



Sheri Soltes and service dog in training Artist.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SERVICE DOGS INC.

Fresca kisses a paramedic. In response to the 2019 El Paso mass shooting, Lady, Chanel, and Fresca visited around 2,600 first responders and community members over six days.

time, these nurses, these doctors, the non-clinical staff, these first responders and medics, they go back to their job better. They're re-energized. They're able to give even more to the community or give more to the patients."

Sadly, Lady has also had to offer comfort at funerals for "dear friends" in EMS, the fire service, and nursing who lost their lives by helping people with COVID-19. She and the other dogs are also able to detect people who are in mental health or emotional crisis and communicate it to the handlers using body language.

"It's really hard to explain, but they're able to tell us who needs more resources, who needs more time, who's going through something right now in their life that they don't necessarily want to share with anybody else," he explains. "Then we're able to discretely and privately align them with the right resources free of charge, no questions asked, and get them the help that they need."

While the hours can be demanding, including 12-hour hospital shifts, Lady loves her job. (She does nap every day at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. to stay fresh.) Trifilio says watching his Lab work her magic with others helps him recharge his own battery.

"Watching her de-stress somebody else makes me feel good. It kind of refills my cup, because I'm still on the

ambulance," he said. "At heart, I love helping people, so having a partner who can do that just by walking in the room, that fills my cup. She's the sweetest little thing."

Lady, Fresca, Chanel, and two other Labs are the first dogs trained by the Texas-based nonprofit Service Dogs, Inc. to be Emergency Services Facility Dogs. Since 1988, the organization has trained dogs for people with disabilities, such as mobility challenges and hearing impairment, as well as Courthouse Facility Dogs who comfort child victims called to testify against abusers.

Founder Sheri Soltes added the first responder program in 2015 at the request of a fire battalion chief who told her suicide rates were rising with first responders, such as those deploying to battle wildfires and floods and working in mobile hospitals set up for long-term emergencies. After placing a black Lab named Vancouver with his fire department, word of mouth quickly spread and requests for Emergency Services Facility Dogs began pouring in.

"It's growing faster than anything else we're doing right now," she says.

So far, the Labs in the program are career-changed dogs from the California-based nonprofit Guide Dogs for the Blind. She said Labs excel at the work because of their temperament.

"It's working full-time in very hectic, very stressful environments. It could be at the nurses' station outside of an emergency room, it could be on the side of the road when an ambulance crew has to stay out there for hours with a big catastrophe, including perhaps juvenile fatalities, or mass shootings, which we're getting a lot of," she shares. "We select these dogs because they're very sensitive but very resilient as well. At the end of the day, they have to be able to shake it off and be cheerful again."

Of course, Labs have been the most popular breed in America for the past 30 years for a reason. Their reputation precedes them.

"Everybody likes Labs – they look so friendly. They're an All-American dog," she says. "So they're already making things better just because they are a Lab." 🐾

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*For more information, visit: [www.servicedogs.org](http://www.servicedogs.org). If you or someone you love is in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK or visit: [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org).*



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).