

FBI Crisis Response K-9s

Labs Wally and Gio
offer support when
it's needed most.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FBI

Wally and Gio.

The man was too traumatized to talk. All anyone knew was that he'd survived a mass shooting and seemed to want help, since he'd entered a Family Assistance Center.

Staci Beers, a victim services coordinator in the FBI's Victim Services Division and a Crisis Response K-9 handler, was heading to a meeting with a yellow Lab named Wally when a colleague grabbed her arm, gestured to the man, and said, "I could really use you over here. We're trying to pull out all the tools we can to engage with this person."

So Beers and Wally walked over to the nonverbal man and stood quietly by him.

"In a nanosecond, this gentleman collapsed on the floor. He sat down with Wally and just sobbed in his fur," she recalled. "After a few moments, he looked up at me and he said, 'Thank you so much. I just needed that.'"

After the encounter with Wally, the man was able to talk to a victim specialist about his needs and connect with resources. While that's remarkable in and of itself, the next day at a public event honoring the victims, Beers heard someone holler, "Wally!" The young man was not only speaking but able to be in public, calling to the dog who ultimately had been at the right place at the right time.

"Wally broke the ice to help us help the victim," Beers said. "And there are hundreds of stories like that. Every day is a different experience."

Wally and a black Lab named Giovanni (aka Gio) joined the FBI in October of 2015 for a pilot program for the FBI's now Victim Services Division. The New Mexico-based nonprofit Assistance Dogs of the West bred and trained Wally and Gio as service and facility dogs (see sidebar), who both know around 90 cues.

That training was put to the test just two months later, when Beers and Wally deployed with Gio and his handler, Melody Tiddle, to the terrorist shooting at a holiday party in San Bernadino, California.

"They immediately knew what to do," she said. "At the basic level, they mitigate stress and anxiety for the victims in our cases. Wally and Gio are just really awesome ambassadors for the Bureau and do a great job in breaking down the barriers and the walls to help people feel a little bit more comfortable."

While science has shown the benefits of interacting with dogs, from a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol to an increase in the love hormone oxytocin, seeing is believing for Beers. She's seen the Labs' positive effects at other

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A THERAPY DOG AND A FACILITY DOG?

While the primary role of therapy dogs and facility dogs is the same - to offer comfort to people in stressful situations - they are different in important ways.

Therapy dogs are pets handled by volunteers. Typically, they visit places like hospitals, children's reading groups, and nursing homes.

Facility dogs are specially trained and handled by professionals who are educated about communicating and providing services in highly charged emotional situations, such as courthouses and mass casualty events. Handlers might hear disclosures from victims and be called to testify as witnesses years later.



Wally and Staci Beers.



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Linda Milanesi, CEO of Assistance Dogs of the West, said the nonprofit is incredibly proud to have trained Wally and Gio for their special work. She said the reason they are so "phenomenal" is the temperament that allows them to feel confident as long as their handler is nearby – particularly since FBI Crisis Response K-9s sometimes deploy for weeks at a time, living in hotels in faraway places.

"It's a totally different routine," she explained. "So the particular temperament we look for is: 'Where you are is my home.'"

Around 90 percent of the dogs placed by Assistance Dogs of the West are Labs, and their jobs are diverse. The Labs work as diabetic alert dogs; seizure response dogs; and facility dogs at courthouses, juvenile detention centers, and classrooms for children with learning disabilities. They also assist people on the autism spectrum; veterans suffering from Traumatic Brain Injuries, PTSD, and anxiety disorders; and those who use wheelchairs.

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Milanesi hopes the public shares her deep appreciation for first responders, like the FBI's Crisis Response K-9 handlers who deploy to mass casualty events.

"They choose to have that level of resilience and professionalism offering caring service to other people – the ability to remember the common good, and to really provide that for our communities," she said. "It's a big deal and they should be honored and respected." 🐾

For more information, visit: assistancedogsofthewest.org.



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mass casualty events, including the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting and 2017 Las Vegas shooting. They also support children called to testify against their abusers in court, and visit families of victims in the ICU, or accompany their handlers when providing death notifications to family members.

Wally is an extrovert who can be quite silly, so he's particularly helpful with children who are nonverbal and need a laugh; he helps draw them out of their shells. (One little girl recently suggested he wear a red shirt because he looks like Winnie the Pooh.) As an introvert, Gio excels with kids who are hyper or highly anxious because he's so calm.

"The power of the animal connection – it cannot be overstated, quite frankly," Beers said.

Beers will walk in with Wally and a squeaky ball for people to toss for him, and the mood in the room will change. "We're very serious. We work a lot of serious cases that are really high profile. And when Wally walks into a room, it could be the most stressful situation. And just for a minute, people will laugh and they will smile," she said.

To help Wally recharge, Beers takes him swimming at an aquatic center with pools just for dogs. "Wally loves water as most Labradors do, and he will swim and swim," she said. "So I just try to give him that release."

Beers, who has worked in victim services for 28 years, including 11 with the FBI's Victim Services Division, called Wally a "game changer" for her – both professionally and personally. "Wally has got a personality on him that I just love," she said. "Every single day, the dog makes me laugh. Every single day, he teaches me something about humans, about myself. He's just an incredible partner."

Wally recharges by swimming.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STACI BEERS