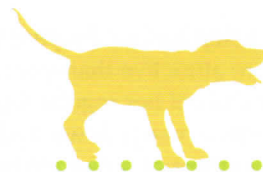




Charlie greets attendees at a fundraiser for muscular dystrophy



*In Their Debt*

by Jen Reeder

# Lab Collars Criminals

*K-9 Charlie sniffs out illegal drugs to protect his community*

**W**hen a yellow Lab named Charlie was 11 months old, he faced an uncertain future. Born the runt of the litter to a breeder in New Hampshire, the high-energy dog was returned by his first owner for getting into mischief while left alone each day with an elderly woman who couldn't control him.

Luckily, Detective Sergeant Brian MacGregor of the Holbrook Police Department in Massachusetts happened to be looking for his first K-9 partner around the same time in 2014. The two enrolled in a 12-week narcotic-detection class hosted by the Massachusetts Department of Correction –

Just Labs

and Charlie proved to be a natural at sniffing out all types of narcotics.

"Whether it's a kilo of cocaine or a Percocet in someone's pocket, he'll alert on it," MacGregor said. "He's a huge resource for the department and the town."

The partners are kept busy by the opioid epidemic that has swept across the United States – people with chronic pain get addicted to painkillers, and when their doctor stops prescribing them, they turn to illegal street drugs, from unprescribed pills to heroin. Heroin is often "cut" with cheaper, powerful synthetics such as fentanyl and carfentanil, which can lead to fatal overdoses.

So Detective Sergeant MacGregor and K-9 Charlie primarily work to bust drug dealers to keep narcotics off the streets. When Charlie detects an illegal drug, he sits and places his nose on the source of the odor. When out of reach, he will point his nose and keep looking at the spot where he detects the scent – he's had several busts involving drugs hidden in ceilings. Then MacGregor rewards the food-motivated Lab with kibble; Charlie also starts breathing heavily and salivating when he alerts because he knows the tasty reward is coming.

"I don't know if he's constantly hungry, but he's constantly willing to work for his food," MacGregor said. "For what we do, it's perfect."

No matter where Charlie needs to search, he knows it's time to work when he sees MacGregor don a food pouch and show him a blue collar. When the blue collar goes around Charlie's neck, he's ready to search. He's found



Detective Sergeant Brian MacGregor and Charlie at the Valor Statue outside the Municipal Police Training Committee in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

crack hidden underneath the carpet in cars and a large amount of crystal meth stashed high in a bureau tucked away in the basement of a housing complex. During a postal inspection, Charlie ran along a conveyer belt and alerted on a package that turned out to have two kilos of cocaine stored in coffee grounds. Four packages later, he alerted on a parcel with a kilo of heroin wrapped in electrical tape and concealed in an Xbox container.

"The drug dealers use any kind of masking agent to try to trick the dog's nose," MacGregor explained. "We've seen peanut butter, dog bones, everything."

But it's hard to trick a detection dog's nose. In fact, MacGregor compared Charlie's nose to a computer that breaks down all of the scents as he searches, distinguishing between body odor, a car that's hit a skunk, and the smell of an opioid or another narcotic.

"I feed him right at the source of the narcotic," he said. "He never eats out of a bowl."

When there's a search warrant for a property, a SWAT team will enter first – handcuffing perpetrators and securing the building for the detective team. MacGregor will stop at each door jamb so that Charlie can do a cursory search of each room, as well as a directed search in which he smells every object MacGregor points to – such as vents, between mattresses, and any other possible hiding places.

"If there are people inside the building, I have them line up two feet off the wall, three feet from each other, and I start at their feet," he said. "I don't have to worry about Charlie biting because he doesn't have any aggression whatsoever in his body. It's a lot safer to do people searches with him than a patrol dog [trained to bite to help



K-9 Charlie headed to a search.




like a happy Lab. The students will pet Charlie and talk about their own dogs at home.

"It opens the doorway to have a conversation, as opposed to the kids being intimidated," MacGregor said. "Charlie's a liaison between us and the community. He's just a big goofball when he's not working. Everyone knows him around town."

At the police station, Charlie is so popular with the civilian dispatchers that they buy him Christmas gifts each year. At home, he's gentle with MacGregor's four- and six-year-old children, even when they pull his tail or try to ride him like a horse.

To keep Charlie's skills sharp through positive reinforcement training, MacGregor makes sure to hide drugs on days off for the dog to find. He also hides drugs after searches don't yield any finds; after a recent search of about 75 cars of high school students didn't turn up any contraband, he hid drugs in a tail pipe so that Charlie wouldn't feel discouraged or give up. Plus, then he got his food reward.

Charlie has free roam of the house, which MacGregor admits can be difficult at times. He can't discipline the curious Lab for jumping on couches or beds, or for putting his front paws up on the table to sniff around – if corrected for those actions, Charlie might start hesitating on the job, looking back for permission to be up on furniture during a search.

"Living with him can be interesting, to say the least," MacGregor said. "It's a lot of work, but it's very rewarding. Charlie's very good at what he does." 

apprehend a suspect if need be]." That trait is particularly valuable in preventive sweeps at high schools or when searching prison and jail inmates.

**W**hen his blue collar is off, Charlie is a typical goofy Lab. He's a hit at elementary schools for "High Five Fridays," when police officers high-five students on their way into school to build trust and offer encouragement. Charlie helps bridge the gap between the "scary" police officers and the kids, because he'll roll onto his back for belly rubs and just act

Keep up with K-9 Charlie by liking his Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/HolbrookPoliceK9Fund/](http://www.facebook.com/HolbrookPoliceK9Fund/)



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).