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This State Police dog can sniff out cell phones – and helped crack a child porn case

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On a Friday in February, police were running out of options.

They'd unsuccessfully searched a Collingswood home and their suspect said he'd destroyed what they were looking for. But after a German Shepherd named Ice walked in and sat down near a piece of furniture, a new hunt began — and it yielded a hidden cell phone with child pornography.

“It was exactly the stuff they were looking for,” said Slawek Stepien, the State Police trooper who is partnered with the four-year-old German Shepherd. “It’s kind of incredible a dog can help you out.”

State Police have 38 K-9s, but Ice is their only “electronic storage detection canine,” a dog with relatively rare training to sniff out a cell phone’s innards.

The FBI has a similar black Labrador in Newark. Other dogs have worked with investigators from Washington to Wisconsin to Ohio. A Labrador named Bear helped catch the former Subway restaurant spokesman Jared Fogle, who was convicted of child sex offenses, according to Indiana State Police.

Ice was born in Germany and began training in New Jersey when he was about 14 months old. Early on, Stepien and other instructors told Ice to search a room for a towel that wasn't there, to see if he would ever give up the search. He didn't.

Ice spins in circles when Stepien puts on a uniform. He knows a truck ride is coming, followed by a job, and jobs are like never-ending games: If he can find something other officers missed, he gets a white terry cloth wrapped tight for tug-of-war.

The partners have conducted 127 searches since Ice was trained in 2017, according to State Police. When New Jersey officers arrested nearly 80 men a few years ago on child predator and pornography charges, officials tipped their hat to Ice (who at the time was called “Mega”).

“With our new mobile forensics lab and electronics-sniffing dog, we’re even better equipped to uncover the evidence that will keep these offenders behind bars,” said then-state Attorney General Christopher Porrino.

Ice cost \$7,000, and he'll likely work for up to ten years.

Research out of Connecticut helped make his skills possible.

In 2012, a Connecticut officer asked a chemist at the state's forensic lab for help.

"Can we get a dog that can smell hard drives?" Jack Hubball, now retired, remembered being asked. He wasn't sure.

"They're not always in a computer," he told NJ Advance Media, referring to the drives. "They hide 'em in a drawer or in a wall, weird places."

Hubball spent months tearing apart laptops, SD cards and phones until he eventually flagged two compounds: One distinctive to circuit board chips, and one found in DVDs and CDs.

Dogs then had to be trained to react to those smells.

"It's a lot simpler than it sounds," said Mark Linhard, a now-retired Connecticut trooper who helped train their first K-9s. He spent nine months giving dogs kibble every time they sat in response to the compounds, while making sure they ignored cat urine, peanut butter and a host of other odors.

Private companies are moving in the same direction.

The Miami-based 3DK9 trained its first dog to smell electronics more than two years ago, when private prisons asked for help rooting out illegal phones, according to president and co-founder Mark Chmielinski.

Now the company has a German shepherd in South Jersey and a German shorthaired pointer in Pittsburgh trained to smell lithium ion batteries, Chmielinski said earlier in the year. Buying, feeding and housing a dog, in addition to about 140 hours of training, costs up to \$9,000, he said, and they generally charge \$250 per hour, per dog.

At least one local rehab facility has also hired them. Keeping phones away from recovering addicts can cut people off from potential sources of drugs, he said, while lowering a facility's liability insurance.

Ice found the Collingswood phone on Feb. 7, according to local authorities. It included both pictures on a social media account and evidence they'd been distributed, the State Police said.

William Salcito, 30, was charged with one count of possession of child pornography and one count of distribution of child pornography. He was released and is awaiting a court hearing, officials said. Messages left at numbers under Salcito's name were not returned.

Ice and Stepien are on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Since Ice is also trained as a patrol dog, they often head out daily, although electronic searches generally happen about three times a week.

“All he wants to do is work,” Stepien said.