

# Chief Zack on the future of the police K9 program

By **Jim Herr** - May 10, 2018



*A Buffalo Police K9 with his handler inside Cheektowaga Central Middle School during a charity volleyball game to raise money for Buffalo Police Officer Craig Lehner's family on November 22nd. (Jim Herr/Cheektowaga Chronicle)*

CHEEKTOWAGA – The Town of Cheektowaga Police Department has been without a K9 program for nearly a year since the [unexpected passing of its dog Wazi last June](#). In a time where heroin overdoses are almost an everyday occurrence, some residents have asked Cheektowaga Chronicle to find out why the department hasn't found a replacement.

We recently spoke with Chief of Police David Zack about the program.

“With our dog dying we knew we could not replace in a timely manner and the cost for a new dog was written out of the budget this time around. I was not going to ask the town for the funding when I knew we weren’t going to be able to fill it in 2018.”

Acquiring a new K9 is costly both monetary and in time according to the chief.

“There’s the training of the handler. There’s the training of the dog. There’s the acquisition of the dog. There are salary implications. But also, the dog itself with food, veterinary bills and so forth. Those are all big expenses.”

Brain Krause, Director of Administration & Finance for the town, says money for the program is spread out over many different budget lines and its hard to nail down the exact figure. For example, the specialized vehicle for the K9 cost upwards of \$50,000 and the handler gets a bump in pay equal to that of a detective.

Complicating matters is the ongoing opioid epidemic. While it might sound logical to have a K9 out on patrol to sniff out heroin on suspects, Mr. Zack says the rise in Fentanyl on the streets could prove fatal to the dog. A month before his death, [Wazi and his partner Officer John Doscocz](#) took part in a training course about how to keep dogs safe around the powerful opioid.

“I’ve heard that some handlers are afraid to introduce the dog in certain situations, so we have to reevaluate that. I have to understand if that’s a legitimate concern or if that’s just a concern aired by some,” said Mr. Zack. “Our officers are out there. We’re making opioid arrests all the time, and we’re doing the best we can with it, and I’m not necessarily certain how much difference we would have made with our old K9 program.”

He says that if a situation calls for the assistance of a specialized K9 the department can call upon neighboring law enforcement agencies for help.

“We’ve utilized them specifically when we used the bomb dog at the [Dollar General shooting](#). The NFTA and the Sheriff’s Office came out immediately.”

As for the future of the K9 program in Cheektowaga.

“There are a ton of issues with K9s right now. If we’re going to reinstitute the program we want it to be successful as possible,” said Mr. Zack. “I have to weigh it all, then we’ll weigh it all as a staff, and we’ll make a determination on whether we get another K9.”