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# This Australian greyhound raced to victory only once, but is big winner with Dallas police

After two recent officer deaths by suicide, DPD welcomes Aussie the therapy dog in a first-in-the-U.S. partnership from Down Under.



A Dallas police officer pets therapy dog Aussie, a retired racing greyhound from Australia, at DPD headquarters Nov. 27. (Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

By [Sharon Grigsby](#)

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The cries of a mother as she cradles her mortally wounded adult son. The crushed body of a teenager behind the wheel in a one-vehicle accident. The visit to a family's home with official word on a loved one's death. The investigation of any case involving a child.

Every first responder carries those memories. They never fade.

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For most of us, the tragedies are just another news brief. For the men and women who make up the Dallas Police Department, each one is another dagger to their soul. That's why DPD's Wellness Unit is trying to change the just-suck-it-up culture long permeating police departments nationwide.

Now joining the force to help lighten the load is Aussie, a male racing greyhound who is about to turn 5 years old and hails from coastal Forster, Australia. First across the finish line only once in 29 races, Aussie has come out of a short but sweet retirement to serve as DPD's first therapy dog.

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Officer Joe King, a member of the Dallas Police Department's Wellness Unit, speaks with The Dallas Morning News as Aussie takes a rest after visiting officers throughout Jack Evans Police Headquarters Nov. 27. (Eliás Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

I got the chance last week to follow Aussie and Joe King, the Wellness Unit officer to whom the greyhound is assigned, during one of the daily rounds they make through DPD headquarters.

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Oohs and aahs broke out as Aussie sauntered through the homicide, special investigations, robbery and sex assault units. Grim-faced homicide detectives set aside their case reports; officers in the robbery pod looked up from their data analysis.

Many officers flee at the thought of yoga or breathing exercises; others can't be dragged to counseling. But most every cop will pet a dog — and they were eager to talk about the oddly comforting aura that comes from having Aussie in their midst.

The sleek black greyhound, with white on the tips of his paws and around his face, “gives hugs” to everyone he meets. He lowers his head, nuzzles his long snout against you and gently nestles his 73-pound body into yours.

It's a quiet and powerful moment. “Aussie's kind energy is being taken on by the person that might be affected or struggling that day,” King said.

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Senior Corporal Jonequia Acron greets Aussie as Officer Joe King visits various police units with the therapy dog. (Eliás Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

The Dallas Police Department is the first in the U.S. to receive a retired racing greyhound through the Aussie Mates in the States initiative. The Sydney-based [Greyhound Racing NSW](#) (New South Wales) and [Greyhounds As Pets NSW](#) created the program after the dogs became such a big hit with first responders Down Under.

“We have plans to make the program really successful in Dallas and then from there expand across the U.S.,” said Russ Feilen, with the greyhound organization.

King is one of five Dallas officers assigned to the Wellness Unit, which began 18 months ago as a resource for officers to get help. Much of the unit’s work is keeping tabs on officers involved in cases that, especially as they pile up, can be harmful to emotional well-being.

It’s not just the biggest horrors, such as the deadly July 7, 2016, ambush of police in downtown Dallas, that scar officers, but the cumulative homicides, fatal car

crashes, suicides, crimes against children and out-of-the-ordinary occurrences on the beat.

Most peer-support models are reactive, King said. “You get the training then wait for someone to come to you if they are in crisis or struggling. We go to them and at least plant a seed.”

Now Aussie goes too.

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A few days before my tagalong with Aussie and King, the pair had visited the Northeast Patrol Division at the invitation of a supervisor concerned about several officers after a homicide call.

“Your mind captures everything, just like any ordinary citizen would,” King said. Too often, instead of processing it, police officers pack the memory down, tight and deep, just like they do with the next one and the one after that.



Jason Paulson, a Dallas police detective in the sex assault unit, says the occasional visit with Aussie is a great break for the 13-year veteran before he returns to his investigative work. (Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

Detective Jason Paulson, part of the sex assault unit and a 13-year DPD veteran, is one of many I talked with who are high on Aussie. “It’s nice to let our guard down,” Paulson said. “To take a nice relaxing moment to breathe before turning back to what I’m investigating.”

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Paulson said the Wellness Unit shows the department is committed to doing whatever it can to prevent problems that, in the worst cases, lead to suicide. “There are things we see that we can’t unsee,” he said. “Things we hear that we can’t unhear. And sometimes that starts to weigh on you.”

King said he constantly receives emails and texts from officers. “They reach out and say, ‘I need some help, my family needs some help.’ Sometimes it’s for marital counseling. Sometimes it’s help with a child.”

“It makes me wonder,” King said, “what were these people doing before?”

The Wellness Unit had been [up and running for about a year](#) when the department lost two officers to suicide in August. One of them, assigned to the U.S. North Texas Fugitive Task Force, [died](#) a day after he and three other officers fatally shot a homicide suspect Aug. 7. The second, assigned to the open records unit, [died](#) several weeks later.

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Two days after the first suicide, [DPD Chief Eddie García implored any police officer](#) going through difficulties to reach out for the many free resources in place.

García also discussed how, had he told his fellow officer in 1992, “ ‘Hey, that call kind of screwed me up,’ my partner would have looked at me and said, ‘Dude, you got to suck it up. We got 10 more hours.’ ”

If he had said those words to a lieutenant in that era, he believes he would have been told, “Maybe this isn’t the right job for you.”

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Posters are displayed throughout the Jack Evans Police Headquarters and in patrol division substations that include a QR code with a direct link to no-cost emotional health resources. (Eliás Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

García pledged that cannot — and will not — be the attitude in 2023.

All over headquarters and substations are posters that say, “Take the first step. Reach out and talk. There is no reason to go it alone. It’s the uncomfortable conversations that save lives and careers.” A QR code provides a list of available support options.

García has been steadfast on the need for better emotional support for officers since becoming chief in 2021 and, with his support, Assistant Chief Reuben Ramirez oversaw creation of the Wellness Unit.

Suicides are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to officer well-being, Ramirez told me. Under the water are depression, anxiety and alcoholism. “They rob the first responder of the ability to be at peace in their personal lives,” he said. “That can be a tough haul over long careers.”

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When the department began focus groups to ask officers what most affected them, the command staff learned it wasn't the danger of the job. It was the images of victims and their grief-stricken loved ones.

In regard to the two suicides in August, Ramirez said the Wellness Unit had interacted with both men prior to their deaths, a reminder of an individual's ability to mask a mental crisis.



Aussie's office space is adjacent to Officer Joe King's desk and he's happy to nap between visits with officers and civilian staff. (Eliás Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

Can Aussie — and the half dozen or so additional retired racing greyhounds the department might place with interested officers next year — help turn the tables on the generations of policing culture and unhealthy coping techniques that undercut mental and emotional well-being?

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“What we can do,” Ramirez said, “is keep tilling the ground of hardened culture.”

Especially for those police officers leery of a yoga mat or therapists’ offices, even a few minutes of break time with Aussie might be the place they are willing to start.



[Sharon Grigsby](#). As the DMN City Columnist and a fourth-generation Texan, I’m focused on all things Dallas. I made what I expected to be a short career stopover here in 1980 and, this many years later, I’m still working to make Dallas a better city for all its residents. You’ll also find me writing about mental health care and substance abuse issues.

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