

## Central Line: The AAHA Podcast Transcript

**Episode Title:** Gems from the Guidelines: Working with Working Dogs

**Guest:** Cynthia Otto, DVM, PhD

**Katie Berlin:** Hi, welcome back to Central Line. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Berlin and I have a very special guest with us here today, Dr. Cynthia Otto, welcome to Central Line. Thanks so much for coming.

**Cynthia Otto:** Oh, thanks for having me, Katie.

**KB:** Dr. Otto, before we get started, would you mind just giving our listeners a brief overview of who you are and what you do?

**CO:** Sure. I am a veterinarian, but I started my career as an Emergency and Critical Care Veterinarian and a researcher. I have transitioned to the Director of the Penn Vet Working Dog Center and a Sports Medicine Veterinarian, and still a researcher, because everything I do is about research and education for working dogs.

**KB:** Love that. And it's such an unusual thing to hear. We don't walk around every day and come into contact with people who work with working dogs. There are so many questions that I have, and I know a lot of people just really love to hear the stories about the dogs and the people that you meet. But can I ask how you got involved with working dogs in the first place?

**CO:** Sure. It's a long story, but we can make it really short. When I was doing my residency down at the University of Georgia, I tended to be the one that was very much emergency-oriented and outdoors, active, interested in all sorts of things. When the phone call came in saying that they needed some veterinary support for one of the search and rescue teams locally, they handed that to me. I called the team and we ended up actually never even connecting. But when I moved to the University of Pennsylvania, I was so intrigued by this concept of search and rescue dogs. Like, "Wow, what do they do and how can I help? And how does my emergency medicine training play into that?" So I eventually joined the Pennsylvania Task Force, which is one of the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue teams.

When I joined as a veterinarian, I did not actually have a dog, but I was there to care for the dogs. I ended up responding to Hurricane Floyd and then to 9/11. Certainly my time at 9/11 was sort of the merging of all of my interests of emergency medicine, research, and these amazing dogs, and we launched the longitudinal study of the dogs that worked at 9/11 that was funded by the AKC canine Health Foundation. That just opened the flood gates and opened my heart to these dogs because there's just nothing better than to be able to support these dogs, to be able to continue research in ways these dogs can continue to perform and excel and be healthy and be happy, because these dogs love what they do, and we want to make sure they do it in a safe and really good environment.

**KB:** I love that you said that, that they love what they do. That's the most we can ask from work, right? That it's something we're passionate about and love doing every day. And that's the image I get when I see pictures and video and interviews with people who work with working dogs, that they just can't wait to get out there and do what they're trained to do. It's a beautiful thing. I can

imagine that you see a lot of pretty amazing things in your work.

We are here today talking in large part because you were the chair of the task force for the 2021 AAHA Working Assistance and Therapy Dog Guidelines that came out last fall, which is really exciting because these were really the first guidelines of their kind, right? Are there any other pieces of work that bring together and consolidate recommendations for people who care for this kind of dog?

**CO:** I think working dogs have started to creep into our literature a little bit more, but these guidelines are absolutely the first thing that have really come out with these kind of clear recommendations. And the group that we pulled together to participate in this was incredibly talented and brought the experience across all the different types of working dogs.

I believe there's a Vet Clinics of North America and a couple of books now that are starting to address working dogs, but these AAHA guidelines are across the board and really directed at any veterinarian or any veterinary program or professional that works with these dogs, to start to open the door and answer some of those important questions of how do we best care for these dogs.

**KB:** Yeah, very exciting! I was in practice until about five minutes ago, and I don't see very many working dogs in my line of work here. Our clinic just didn't seem to get a lot of those patients. Back when I worked in New York, I worked on some border patrol dogs which were... kind of terrifying to me. I wish I'd had these guidelines then, because these dogs are just so impressive. But the thing that really struck me was how bonded they were to their handlers. It was like you could see the bond in the air between them, like a tension where I felt safe as long as they were looking at their handler or their handler was looking at them.

You could feel that bond coming out of the pages of these guidelines - how important it is to take that relationship into consideration, whether it's a working dog or an assistance dog. I really love seeing the different ways that the human-animal bond can show up, and this is a really special read. I would encourage people, even if they don't work on working dogs very often, to take a look at these guidelines because I feel like there's definitely a lot we can learn from these. Can you talk about some of the unique challenges and differences in caring for working dogs apart from the dogs we see in general practice?

**CO:** Sure, and I think it's really important to recognize what we mean by working dogs. We need to think about the different categories. We have our assistance and our service dogs. We pretty much are familiar with our guide dogs, but there are so many other service and assistance dogs, and again, these dogs have an incredible relationship with their handlers. They depend on each other. We also have what we would call our law enforcement or patrol dogs, which would also include our military working dogs, or dogs that do protection work. They would be dogs that would do criminal apprehension. But most of the police dogs are what we call dual purpose; they also do a scent detection task. We might have a dog that does explosive detection, but also does criminal apprehension and maybe some tracking as well.

And then we have our single-purpose detection dogs, and those might be dogs that strictly do explosive detection. In the airport, we have dogs that are screening passengers and they may be shepherds, but more commonly, they're probably Labradors or German Shorthair Pointers. So their job is purely nose-driven. And in the single-purpose realm, we also have our search and rescue

dogs, who work in a couple of different environments, whether that's a disaster environment, which is the type of search and rescue dogs I've spent the most of my time with, or the ones that work in more of the wilderness type environments. And across all of those, there is that incredible relationship between the dog and the handler, and it is truly life-dependent and life-saving.

As veterinarians, particularly if you don't see many of these dogs, it's really valuable to go through the guidelines and get some suggestions as to how these dogs are different and how we need to think about them differently and work in a way that is truly cooperative care - not only cooperative with the dog, but cooperative with the handler, so it is a team approach. And we have strongly recommended that we work with the handler and the dog as a team and that we don't remove the handler from the dog. Certainly with the police dogs and the military working dogs, that's a whole safety issue and a trust...

**KB:** I did not want to remove those dogs.

**CO:** No, please be there and help assist me with that. For sure.

**KB:** Listening to you talk about that, I'm thinking about the Fear-Free movement and low stress handling and how, in the time since I graduated, the focus has changed so much. My first job we were holding dogs down under a blanket to get blood samples.

**CO:** Oh absolutely, yeah.

**KB:** And now we're doing it in the room with the owner and some cheese, and it's a totally different approach to animal handling in general. Do you feel like that's something that is taken to a higher level with these working dogs and that maybe we could take some of that with us to general practice?

**CO:** I think that this whole movement towards low stress handling, Fear-Free, cooperative care, however you want to define it, is absolutely essential. Because what I learned early on in working with these search and rescue dogs - these are Labradors, not threatening dogs - they are the worst patients. They have this independent thought, they're very smart, and if they don't want to do something, they don't do it, you cannot wrestle them. And with police dogs, you do not want to wrestle them. So really trying to incorporate as much of this low stress, cooperative care as possible is really good for us, and it's good for the dogs. Here at the working dog center, that's all we do. It sometimes takes us a while to do vaccines on the dog because we're going to take that time. We use a lot of peanut butter.

But we have dogs we've trained so they just stand and we'll take blood from them with minimal crowding, one person, we'll just do a very quick draw and they'll stand there and lick their peanut butter cup, and they're fine with it. It came out of necessity because unless you sedate these dogs, you're not going to manhandle them to get them to participate in veterinary care. Once you start manhandling them, it only escalates because they go into defense mode that can destroy your bond. It can interfere with their work.

**KB:** I would imagine that especially in the case of an assistance dog, seeing the dog distressed would be potentially very detrimental to their person, that bond is so strong.

**CO:** Oh, absolutely, and another thing that we have to think about is if we have a visually impaired handler and you're doing things to their dog, the handler is picking up that the dog is stressed.

How we communicate during our whole exam and making sure that that handler is absolutely attuned to what's going on [is so important.] Because as the handler gets stressed, the dog gets stressed, and as the dog get stressed, the handler gets more stressed. And then not only are we creating stress, but we're also not able to pick up some of those subtle findings. What we find, because these handlers and dogs are so attuned to each other, is that handlers will bring in a dog and say, "You know, there's just something off." I can't even see a pulled muscle or something that is going to impact that dog's performance and that dog's safety and the handler's safety if that dog is on guard. We really want to maximize that low stress environment to maximize what we can observe and give back to that dog.

**KB:** Those all seem like really good lessons for people in practice in general. To listen.

**CO:** I've always used the phrase, "I don't want to be a dog whisperer, I want to be a dog listener." I think we need to listen to these dogs and acknowledge that the handlers may not have the medical knowledge, but they know their dogs. Even if I have a completely normal CBC/chem and my usual physical exam, which might be a very quick hands-on, isn't picking it up, there are going to be more subtle things. Now we have to start thinking about sports medicine - what about functional movement? What's going on with how that dog's performing? Are there some subtle things that we really need to dig in on? Because if we do have a pulled muscle, that certainly could interfere with dog's ability to function.

**KB:** I think the lessons we can take from working with animals who are so finely tuned to do a job, but also have people who are so tuned in to them - that seems to be how pet owners are now. These are family members in many cases, and listening to the pet owners, keeping them involved in many cases, not separating them, that's how people want us to practice now, and it's becoming an expectation. That kind of transparency and active listening and approaching veterinary care as a team seems like it's becoming the norm, and I love that. It's so much more fun to be a team rather than to stand on the pedestal in your white coat hand down advice.

**CO:** No, and I think if we approach it as a team, even for people with their pet dogs, by engaging in what we call husbandry training or any kind of training, we know that for people who work with their dogs, who train their dogs, that actually enhances the human-animal bond. We have people who do competition sport with their dogs, and I used to do that too, and I realized how much that really enhanced my relationship with my dog. We take that to a professional level, and you can just see how that grows. So it's really something to aim for if we're going to build our relationships, not only with dogs, but with any of our companion animals. The more we listen to them, the more we interact with them, the better our relationship - and we can work together with them as a veterinary team for their care. I think that that's just universal across the board as something we can learn from the relationship these dog handlers have, and hopefully enhance that in all of our clients.

**KB:** You mentioned sporting dogs and going to events with your dogs. Do you ever get pushback from people in your work with working dogs who don't think dogs should be doing this kind of work - that it's putting them in danger unnecessarily or forcing them to do something they don't want to do?

**CO:** It's something we think about. Should dogs be doing this? I can tell you that it's actually more harmful to take a dog that is bred for generations to have this kind of intensity and this kind of focus and *not* allow them to do something. What we can think about is: how do we enhance the safety and the welfare of the dogs in these jobs? But doing these jobs is 100% valuable and really good for the dogs, and we actually even have data to support that.

We studied and followed the search and rescue dogs that worked at 9/11, and we compared their longevity, their diseases, to a group of search and rescue dogs that didn't respond to 9/11. What we found is that 9/11 could not be associated with any real ill effects on the dogs that went. We need to know if there's a problem, so we can change our management practices, our trainings, anything that might be an adverse effect. But we actually didn't find that their experience at 9/11 resulted in any kind of systematic behavioral change or physical abnormalities that weren't found across all dogs. 30% of them developed cancer, but so did 30% of the dogs that didn't go to 9/11. We couldn't find an association.

But to me, the most amazing information that we gained out of that study, following 95 Labradors and Shepherds and other dogs that went and 55 that didn't, is that when we looked at them as a group overall, the longevity of those dogs was actually higher than our pet dogs of the same breeds. When we're dealing with dogs that have jobs, there are a lot of reasons this might be: whether it's that they're more physically fit, or that bond that they have, or that they're not sitting, bored all the time, that they're mentally and physically active - they live about two and a half years longer than pet dogs of similar breeds.

I think another piece is veterinarians. When we help people select the type of dog that's right for their lifestyle, we need to make sure that they understand that if you're going to get a hunting line Labrador, that is not a dog that is going to be happy sitting on the couch. He's going to eat the couch. He needs that physical and mental stimulation, and it's not just running. Chasing a ball is not enough. They actually need that mental stimulation to keep them happy and thriving.

These dogs love what they're doing. They are so excited to be able to do this kind of work - I think it is actually a gift that we have working dogs. But we have to think about how we treat them and make sure that we are enhancing that bond and that we develop the science to support these dogs in the best way possible.

**KB:** I love that answer. That makes me think of that movie that everybody's putting out memes about now: *Dog* with Channing Tatum and the Belgian Malinois. Everybody's putting out memes because they're really scared of all their clients that are gonna...

**CO:** Help us, please.

**KB:** ...Go out and get one. It is much crueler, in my opinion, to put a Belgian Malinois in a small apartment with a bunch of kids versus letting a dog do what it's bred to do and naturally is inclined to love.

**CO:** I fostered one of our dogs for a program that was a Belgian Malinois, and I definitely... They are brilliant dogs, but they're a Ferrari, and they absolutely need a job. They are not pets. Not pets.

**KB:** I'm thinking of a Malinois I knew who had a wonderful owner, but the dog was so fearful in

the clinic - and this was really before we were handing out anti-anxiety medications to everybody the way that I happily do now. He had pulmonic stenosis that went undiagnosed for a couple of years because people could barely get close to him, and when they did he was growling and you just never got a good auscultation. And then suddenly here's this giant murmur. It was a shock that day.

In some areas in veterinary medicine, you have people who are taking care of farm animals or draft horses who have to pull a cart, like Amish horses. Animals where there's a very clear economic line beyond which they're not going to be saved; the veterinary care is not going to be worth the money to that owner. And I was just wondering, in your work, do you find that most of the organizations you work with are willing to go to that next level to pay for medical care for the dog?

**CO:** I think that's a great question, and it's a real challenge because we have to look at the populations that have these dogs and are working with these dogs. In some of the service dog organizations, the organizations maintain ownership of the dogs, so they're able to make sure that they can provide the care. But for some people who have service dogs, they might have challenges with having a job or holding a job, so they might not have the finances to support it - but their lives depend on it. How do we support them so that they don't have to make these decisions on a financial basis? That's a challenge for us as a veterinary profession and as a community. Some search and rescue dogs are owned by fire departments, but a lot of the search and rescue handlers are volunteers. 20 years ago, when I looked at the numbers, people were spending about \$15,000 a year just on training and supporting their dogs, and it's coming out of their own pocket.

The thing about the search and rescue folks is they will probably not have dinner to be able to support the care of their dogs. But we need to be attentive because these are public servants. They're doing a service for our community that would otherwise not be done. There are going to be some situations where it becomes a financial decision, but usually they're going to do everything they can, or they might opt for a less expensive route if there's an alternative. Our law enforcement agencies have some financial constraints, but a lot of times if that dog reaches a point where there is a major problem that's going to prevent it from working, they'll retire the dog, and a lot of those dogs will then go to live with the handler. Once they're retired, the department no longer pays for their care, so it's on the handler again.

Luckily, there are some charitable organizations that help support working dogs in this kind of situation, but it's really difficult. When we look at the service that these dogs provide, it is something that we need to figure out. Luckily, we don't run into it too often, but there are definitely financial situations that come up that we have to have a conversation about. One of the most difficult decisions when we're dealing with working dogs is the question of euthanasia. There's nothing that moves you more than when not only the whole police department, but all of the neighboring police department canine units file into your hospital to say goodbye to one of their colleagues. These are officers. I choke up even thinking about some of the settings when I've had to be in that situation; it's not something they take lightly at all.

**KB:** No, no. I'm glad. I feel like that must put a lot of pressure on you and colleagues who work on these dogs - I'm thinking of not just the police dogs that come in with a gunshot wound or something, these dramatic rescues and saves, but also somebody's assistance dog who's been with them for a decade and they're sick now, and they have something that you can't fix. How do you handle that kind of pressure and emotion?

**CO:** It's really tough. It really is. I guess the way I try to think about it, just as having lost a dog that was with me for 17 years, is that every day is a gift that I have that dog, and the opportunity to have been able to experience that. As part of the team, with that handler and that dog, to be able to provide the care that we know is the very best possible, that is the only way we can get through that - because we know they're all going to die some time, and if we focus on that, it's just going to rip your heart out every time.

**KB:** The most beautiful and terrible thing about working with animals is that you know they're not begrudging any of those days or any of the days they're not going to get, they just live in the moment.

**CO:** We need to learn from dogs about joy. Definitely a lesson that we can learn from them.

**KB:** Well, Dr. Otto, this has been fantastic. Before we wrap up, I just wondered, do you have any stories about a particular dog or a particular dog and person combo that really touched you?

**CO:** So many stories. I think one of the ones that probably brings tears to my eyes almost every time is one of the search and rescue dogs, Bretagne, who was the last surviving dog from 9/11. She was a Golden Retriever and her handler, Denise Corliss, came to ground zero as our team was leaving. Bretagne was just certified at that time, I think either 18 months or two years old, and throughout the years until she turned 16 - I think she died about 16 and a half or a little bit older - the relationship that Denise and Bretagne had, it was so wonderful.

Not only did they serve as search and rescue dogs on Texas's task force, but she went on to be a reading assistance dog and just an all-around dog who touched the world. She was really, really amazing. I mean, there are so many dogs that have so many incredible stories, and it's that relationship - again, the dogs are incredible - but it's the team, their connection with people that really puts them into a whole different realm.

**KB:** I love that. I remember reading about Bretagne.

**CO:** She had a sweet 16th birthday, which was a very fun video on YouTube, and then the video when they finally had to make the decision that it was time to put her down was again a full-on tear jerker.

**KB:** I can imagine. Well Dr. Otto, I could ask you questions all day -

**CO:** I could talk about working dogs all day. There's just so much to say about them.

**KB:** Well, hopefully we'll get to hear more of your stories sometime in the future. But thank you so much for spending this time and talking to us about some of the points from the Guidelines about really listening. I think we can all take that away into our practice, whether we're working on working dogs or not. I really do think these Guidelines are a good read for anybody in practice because we can take those lessons with us.

**CO:** Yeah, I do think that they're great across the board, and if people do want to learn more and really hone those skills and build that up, we have a certificate program that we teach through the Working Dog Center called Working Dog Practitioner. That allows people to take it to that next

level. I think the Guidelines are a wonderful introduction, but if people want to take on more education and really understand the nuances of working with these incredible dogs, then I would encourage people to look into [workingdogpractitioner.com](http://workingdogpractitioner.com).

**KB:** Absolutely. I'll put that in the show notes so people can just go right to it. That's wonderful, I didn't know that. That's fantastic.

**CO:** Thanks for having me, Katie, It's been great talking to you.

**KB:** You too. And thanks everyone for listening, we'll catch you next time on Central Line.