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Sheriff's canines are 'vested' employees

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Chris Medeiros of the Bristol County Sheriff's Office, suits up "Bono" with a suit of canine armor donated from Vested Interest in K-9s during a ceremony on Friday. The vest protects against "blunt force trauma," such as a blow from a bat, a knifing or a gunshot.

David W. Oliveira/Standard-Times Special

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By **Curt Brown**
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July 14, 2012 12:00 AM

DARTMOUTH — Working side by side with their law enforcement handlers, police canines search woods and swampy areas for armed suspects, hunt for lost children and comb neighborhoods for Alzheimer's patients.

They're partners against crime and to do the often dangerous work, they need the same protection as their human handlers, who many times wear protective vests.

On Friday, the canines at the Bristol County Sheriff's Department received five new protective vests, compliments of Sandy Marcal of East Taunton and her nonprofit agency, Vested Interest in K-9s Inc.

The vests, which cost \$1,006 each, were provided free of charge.

"This is incredible for us. I can't thank you enough," Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson told Marcal at the "vesting ceremony" held at the House of Correction. "If our canines could say thank you, I'm sure they would."

The sheriff said his department's canines are used in event of a riot or an uprising at the House of Correction as well as in local communities that don't have police dogs.

"These dogs are the first in, last out," said Sgt. Paul Douglas, a canine officer with the sheriff's department.

"It's just a good level of protection for the dog to have," said Lt. Jeff Williams, who heads the sheriff's canine unit. "These dogs are no different than the officer. You want them protected also."

Marcal said the vests protect the dogs against "blunt force trauma" such as a blow from a bat, a knifing or a gunshot. However, she said, the vests don't completely prevent injury in the event of a gunshot, explaining that depends on how far away the bullet was fired and the caliber of the projectile.

Marcal said each dog is measured so the 6-pound vest fits securely, then she orders them.

She said her agency has been raising money the last 12 years and has donated more than 300 vests to law enforcement agencies, including the New Bedford, Dartmouth and Fall River police departments.

"I love animals. They don't have a voice. Someone needs to have a voice for them," she said, explaining her passion.

Marcal said her program is going nationally and internationally. She said a month ago she gave two canine vests to the Honolulu Police Department. And after learning that police dogs in Germany don't have protective vests, she is soliciting vests for canines there; Hodgson donated six used vests from his department to her effort.

Funds to buy the vests given Friday were either donated or raised by Dartmouth Dental of Dartmouth and New Bedford, Panagakos Development of New Bedford and The Pet Food Shoppe of Lakeville.

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