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A puppy named ‘Wednesday’ is the first therapy dog for local first responders

“Maybe a dog’s head on your lap can generate some calmness,” a therapist and former firefighter said.

by [Alfred Lubrano](#)

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“Wednesday,” the sweet manipulator, has already puzzled out how to reap treats and belly rubs from tough veteran Vineland firefighters and emergency medical techs.

Secret softies, the hard cases just melt.

The 5-month-old Labrador retriever puppy is a relative rarity: a therapy dog for first-responders, in training to de-escalate the tension and lower the cortisol level of frontline trauma personnel.

While comfort animals have been around for decades, dogs whose job is to specifically love-bomb professional rescuers and heroes have long-been eschewed by the savior set, whose pattern is to absorb the calamities they witness, then go out for beers.



EMT Kennedy Santiago is photographed with her Labrador retriever named Wednesday during a workday at the Vineland EMS Station in Vineland, N.J. Thursday, Oct. 26, 2023. Wednesday is said to be the only therapy dog exclusively for first responders in South Jersey (and possibly the entire region). Read more Jose F. Moreno / Staff Photographer

“The tradition among us is ‘Suck it up, buttercup,’” said Richard Franchetta, director of Vineland’s fire department and Emergency Medical Services. “Whether we dealt with a drowning, a car accident, an injured child, we’ve always had to be tough.”

The deleterious results, Franchetta and [medical professionals](#) say, have been high rates of alcoholism, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and death by suicide. “The things we see, stay inside, then get triggered out of nowhere. You never know when the pain will creep up on you,” Franchetta said.

“So now, we say we’re all humans,” Franchetta continued. “We know that we need to grieve, and that we need support.”

Jeff Dill, a therapist and former firefighter who’s CEO of the [Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance](#) in Las Vegas, agrees.

“It’s a big struggle for us out there,” Dill said in an interview. “We saw more firefighters die by suicide between 2014 and 2020 than they did while working on the job.

“Maybe a dog’s head on your lap can generate some calmness.”

‘All the kids around here already know her name’

Vineland first responders believe Wednesday is the only therapy dog in South Jersey that belongs to a specific municipality’s fire, EMS, and police departments.

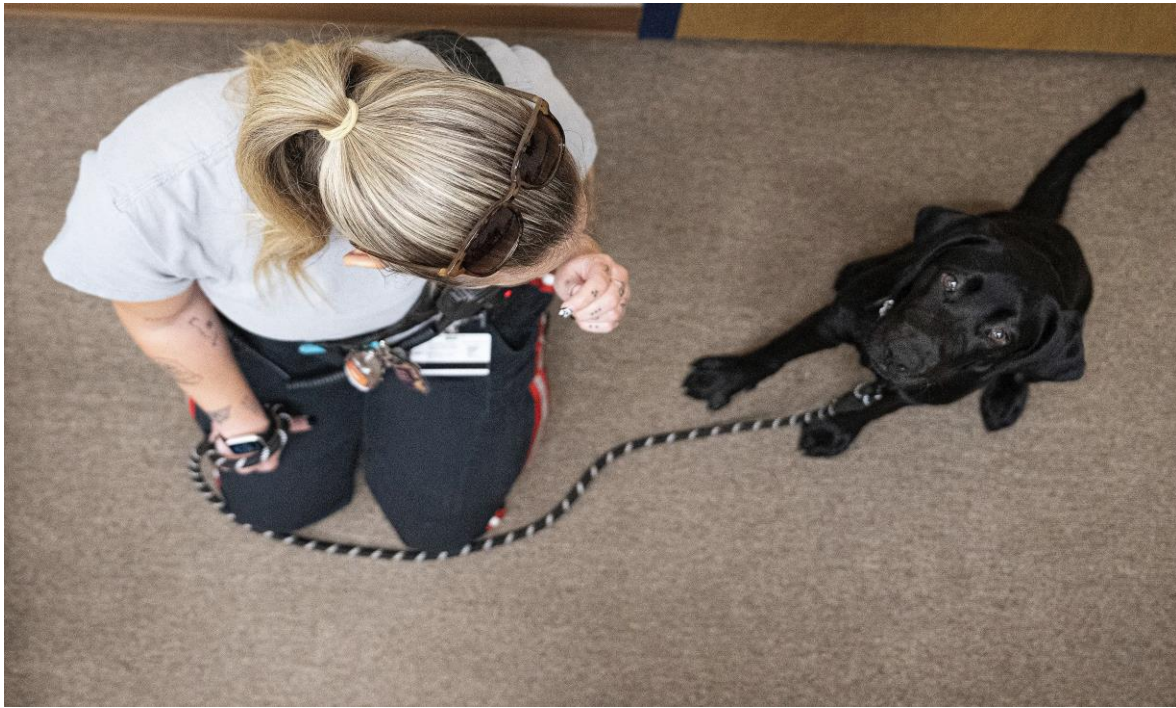
There are just a few like her scattered across the country, according to Tracy Ryan, director of New England operations for [First Responder Therapy Dogs](#), a California-based nonprofit. It’s the only national animal-support organization dedicated exclusively to first responders.

The difference between Ryan’s operation and Wednesday’s group is that Ryan directs teams of people to bring rescue dogs to first responders for therapeutic visits.

Wednesday, however, is in Vineland to stay.

Over the last five years, the idea of therapy dogs for first responders may have been nudged along by younger fire fighters and EMTs, Ryan said: “That generation is more open to discussing their feelings.”

Sure enough, acquiring Wednesday (born on a Tuesday, by the way) was the idea of 28-year-old millennial Kennedy Santiago, an EMT and the Lab’s handler. On her own time, she rescues and fosters dogs.



Vineland EMT Kennedy Santiago with Wednesday, the therapy dog. Jose F. Moreno / Staff Photographer

Santiago went looking for an animal, and found just the right one online, part of a litter in Milmay, Atlantic County.

She named the black Lab after the smart and sarcastic title character of the Netflix comedy-horror show *Wednesday*, starring Jenna Ortega.

“Like Wednesday Addams, this puppy is quirky and different,” Santiago said. “She’s all her own girl when she’s off a leash. But on the leash, she knows the rules.”

The city of Vineland paid \$600 to buy Wednesday. And Joe Nick K-9 Training of Vineland is donating the year-long training Wednesday will need to be a certified therapy dog. She lives with Santiago and her family, but comes in to work every day.

Last week, Wednesday made her public debut, charming kids and grownups at a Vineland trunk-or-treat event. “She was so loved,” said Kelly Soracco, chief EMT. “All the kids around here already know her name. I’ve worked here 33 years, and no one knows mine.”

Scratching Wednesday behind the ear, Soracco said she once thought her Jack Russell mix could make a good therapy dog. “Turns out he’s a velociraptor,” she said with a shiver.

Similarly, Franchetta figured he’d volunteer his Boston terrier-French bulldog mix for the job. But, he said, “that dog is crazy.”

Wednesday, all agree, is none of those things.

“I’ve never had a better dog,” Santiago said.

As if to underscore her point, Vineland Fire Chief Luigi Tramontana, dressed in his sharp-creased uniform, bent over and began wrestling with Wednesday on the linoleum floor.

“Wednesday’s such a good girl. A good girl!” he said, a certified softie after all.