



TRAINING IDAHO'S FINEST

Every law enforcement officer in the state goes through POST's programs — here's a look behind the scenes

By JOHN FUNK
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Adam Eschbach/PT

POST Instructor Joshua Overgaard, left, shows how to perform a vertical arm bar on parole officer Steven Stewart, below with parole officer Desirae Howell, right, watching during a POST Academy class Sept. 4 in Meridian.

They start their days at the break of dawn. Maybe you'll spot them in the gym doing early-morning calisthenics, or maybe they're taking a written test in one of the lecture halls. Maybe it's hands-on training in hand-to-hand combat, weapon disarms and other defensive tactics.

If they're lucky, they might squeeze in a quick breakfast in the cafeteria.

And once they start, they'll keep going for the rest of the day. Those training to become certified police live a highly structured life during their weeks of study, and that's by design — they don't get much free time.

Idaho's Peace Officer Standards and Training, or POST, trains nearly every law enforcement officer active in the state. Most students are first hired by local police agencies and then train for free, but others pay their own way in hopes of landing a law enforcement job afterward.

Those who complete its programs become certified to fill a variety of law enforcement roles, whether as jail guards, patrol officers, dispatchers or probation and parole.

Each class trains officers from agencies across the state, which creates lasting camaraderie even after they graduate. That comes in handy if, for example, a Nampa officer believes a suspect may have fled to Pocatello. A helping hand from old POST buddies is just a simple phone call away.

Today, the Idaho Press-Tribune takes a look at how Idaho's state law enforcement training facility prepares its students for the reality of police work.

➤ **Special report, A4-5**

TRAINING FOR LIFE AND DEATH

Meridian POST Academy prepares future law enforcement officers for anything



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The courses are designed to push their students beyond what they think they can handle. When it's a matter of life and death, law enforcement officers might have to draw on an inner strength they didn't even know they had.

The program weeds out those who can't hack it, and teaches those who can how to harness it. Students who graduate from Idaho's POST academy can call themselves law enforcement officers. Otherwise, at least they tried.

Photos by Adam Eschbach/PPT

Chuck Norris, a drug detection canine for the Idaho State Police, catches a scent from a bag of marijuana stashed underneath the hood of a truck during a practice exercise Thursday at the Idaho State Police headquarters in Meridian. Norris is owned by Jill Nichols, a K9 Coordinator who adopted Norris in December 2008 from the Idaho Humane Society. "Some dogs have it and some dogs don't," Nichols said.

PEACE OFFICER STANDARDS AND TRAINING

Most students end up at POST after being hired by one of the state's many local law enforcement agencies, Division Administrator William L. Flink said. Occasionally, a student will pass the required background check and pay their own way — about \$4,700 — in hopes of finding a job later.



William Flink
POST Division
Administrator

The agencies don't pay anything to have their employees trained, he said — the facility is funded at the state level through fees and fines.



Ralph Powell
Idaho State Police
Colonel

"The basic purpose is to provide standard training," said Idaho State Police Colonel Ralph Powell, who serves on the POST Council. "Not only standard, but standardized. From county to county, agency to agency, they're all trained to the same specific level."

Before becoming a POST academy student, a prospect has to pass a stringent background investigation.

"There's the application process, the medical process, there's a polygraph, and there's a psychological test that they have to take," Flink said. "It's similar to what it would be for a trooper."

When a student enters the patrol academy, he said, they're in for an intense, fast-paced curriculum — 13 weeks worth of material in 10 weeks. Why so quick? Because the local agencies want their people back and on the street as quickly as possible. Every student lives in the POST dormitories during their training — even those that live close enough to commute.

Subjects covered in the first week include ethics, community policing and cultural diversity. The second week covers legal issues an officer will likely encounter. On week three, they start the fun part — defensive tactics, firearms training and emergency vehicle operations.



POST Instructor Tyler Nicodemus, top, demonstrates a straight arm bar takedown on POST Instructor Austin Legg, during a POST Academy class Sept. 4 at the Idaho State Police headquarters in Meridian.

THE ACADEMIES

The following training programs are offered at POST:

- Patrol
- Detention
- Correction
- Felony probation and parole
- Juvenile detention and probation
- Misdemeanor probation
- Dispatch

Source: POST Division Administrator William Flink

Finally, they learn the procedures they'll need on the job as patrol officers — building searches, low-risk and high-risk traffic stops.

"We try to give them a good mixture between lecture and practical exercises," Flink said. "They'll go through domestic violence and sexual assault training, crime scene investigation and preservation, drugs, auto theft, until we get down to the final week where we're trying to make it as practical as possible."

Once they graduate and return to their home agencies, they'll typically continue with on-the-job training with a more senior officer. And past graduates often return, he added, for more advanced training. An expe-

rienced patrol officer might want to pursue detective work or some other specialization.

"We have specialized training going on all the time," Flink said. "Whether we're putting it on or sponsoring it, or one of the agencies are sponsoring it."

Much of the training is designed to push POST students to their limits — and then push them a little further. Once they're on the street, they have to have the confidence they need to get the job done.

"You have to find the strength to rescue your partner," Powell said. "A lot of the drive is that other people are depending on you. Their lives are in your hands — don't you dare let them down."

A STATEWIDE PERSPECTIVE

Once an officer is POST certified, it's up to each individual agency to continue training with their own internal policies and procedures. In most local departments, that means hitting the streets immediately under the tutelage of a more experienced officer until the new recruit is ready to fly solo, Flink said.

And while Idaho sets its own law enforcement standards, Powell said, you wouldn't find many differences among law enforcement academies in other states.

"Like most industries, POST academy directors or administrators meet regularly to compare notes and make sure that whatever's cutting edge, so to speak, is being captured in all the states and all the academies," Powell said. "They share that information at least twice a year, but they also have smaller groups. Once you get that network in place, you have people from different states that you call and just kind of check in with."

Standards might change fast, and POST has to be ready to change its training accordingly. If the state legislature passes a new law or the Supreme Court issues a decision rendering an existing police procedure obsolete — or even illegal — the facility has to adapt its curriculum immediately, Idaho State Police Public Information Officer Teresa Baker said.

Or the opposite can happen — a new law or ruling might allow searches and seizures in situations where they weren't previously permitted. Either way, the standards need to change accordingly

And that, Powell added, is why it's important for prosecuting attorneys to have input into POST's training standards.

"It's an annual even to tune up 'law week,' as we call it," Powell said. "Any caselaw that comes out from the Supreme Court, it has to be addressed and spoken to."

THE POST COUNCIL

Who decides POST's curriculum? A group made up of sheriffs, police chiefs, prosecuting attorneys and other law enforcement leaders meet regularly to anticipate the future of law enforcement needs, and tailor the facility's programs to meet them.

The current council consists of:

- Jefferson County Sheriff Blair Olsen (Chairman)
- Weiser Police Chief Gregory Moon (Vice Chairman)
- Rathdrum Police Chief Kevin J. Fuhr
- Rexburg Police Chief Shane Turman
- Ada County Sheriff Gary Raney
- Latah County Sheriff Wayne Rausch
- Idaho State Police Colonel Ralph Powell

■ Ada County Prosecuting Attorney Greg H. Bower

■ Attorney General's Office Criminal Law Division Chief Paul Panther

■ Idaho Department of Correction Director Brent Reinke

■ Idaho Department of Fish and Game Chief of Enforcement Jon Heggen

■ Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections Director Sharon Harrigfeld

■ Federal Bureau of Investigation Supervisory Special Agent Ernst Weyland

■ Idaho Association of Counties Daniel Chadwick

■ Idaho Association of Cities Executive Director Ken Harward

Source: Idaho Peace Officer Standards and Training

Detention 61 Officers James Worthington, left, and Miguel Noriega, practice weapon retention during a weapons retention class Sept. 4 at the Idaho State Police headquarters in Meridian.



Detention 61 Officers Alaina Morales, left, and Tyler Wray, practice weapon retention.

THE K-9 ACADEMY

At POST, the lead K-9 instructors are Training Coordinator Jil Nichols and her four-legged partner Chuck Norris. Yes, the drug-sniffing border collie/pit bull mix is officially an instructor. His framed portrait even appears on the wall alongside POST's human faculty members.



Jil Nichols
POST Training
Coordinator

"We manage all of the K-9 certifications," Nichols said. "Just like the human officers, the dog and the handler have to be certified in order to work on the street in the state of Idaho."



Chuck Norris
POST Trainer

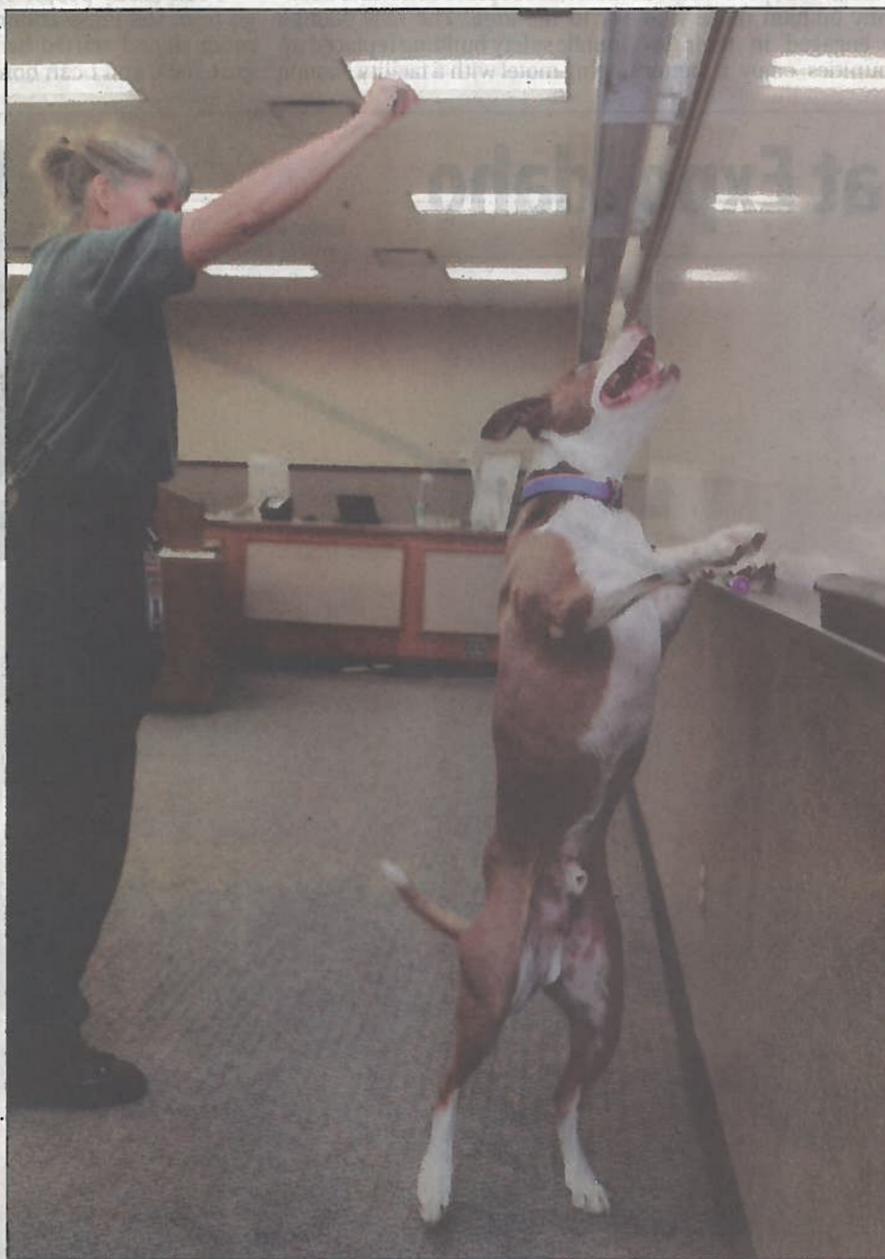
POST's K-9 program is kind of unique, Nichols explained, in that it's one of only two state training facilities in the nation that runs its own certification programs. Oregon, by contrast, requires its police dogs to be certified, but the program is run by a third-party association.

And it's not at all rare for a dog to hold multiple certifications — a combination of patrol and drug detection is particularly common, Nichols said. There are roughly 200 K-9 units certified in the state of Idaho, she said, and most of them are concentrated right here in the Treasure Valley.

"Nampa Police Department, Boise Police Department — not all of them, but several of their dogs are what we call dual-purpose," she said. "Whereas Norris is a single-purpose. He's just drug detection."

The human officers form a bond with their canine companions, but it's a work bond, Nichols said. These aren't pets. The handlers take them home, but they typically don't go inside. The kids don't get to play with them. A police dog needs to know that when they come out of the kennel, it's time to go to work.

"It's a living, breathing being, so it's not like your sidearm, which you're not going to form a bond with. Well, I don't know, maybe some people do," she said with a laugh. "But they're kept in the kennel. That's where they



Chuck Norris jumps up after catching a scent from a bag of marijuana during a practice exercise with K9 Coordinator Jil Nichols.

K-9 CERTIFICATIONS

There are five different certifications a police dog can achieve, POST K-9 training coordinator Jil Nichols said, and a given dog can be certified in up to four. Why not all five? A dog can't be trained to sniff for both drugs and explosives — it's one or the other.

"It's not because the dog can't do it," she said. "It's for officer safety reasons. It's because if the dog is telling you something is there, you don't know if it's going to go boom."

The certifications include:

- Drug detection
- Bomb detection
- Tracking
- Patrol
- Evidence

Source: POST Training Coordinator Jil Nichols

stay. They get let out to go outside, but they're not part of the family. The theory is that they want them to come out of that kennel and be like, 'All right, it's time to go to work.' It's like putting your uniform on."

Police dogs are actually considered police officers under Idaho Code, Nichols said. They have their own badges and ID cards, and if mistreated or killed, the suspect can get a charge similar to what they'd get for a crime against a human officer.

Dogs working in high-crime areas even wear bulletproof vests made just for them. When they leave the force, they even get retirement ceremonies and funerals along the same lines as their human counterparts, Baker said.

Norris, for example, is pretty self-sufficient, Nichols said. He may not literally think, "I'm a police officer," but he knows how to do his job, and he doesn't need much direction to do it.

"He only needs me because I have thumbs and can drive him around and throw the ball for him," Nichols said. "He's probably the smartest animal that I have ever had. This is my third dog, and he's so smart it just amazes me every time he works."