

# Courageous canines get top professional care

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Photos: Singapore USAR  
Media



BRAVE, hardworking, and committed to their task. You could be talking about any member of the rescue teams trying to find earthquake survivors and bodies amongst debris in the Christchurch city centre following the February 6.3 earthquake.

These brave little souls, however, are not people. They have four legs, a keen sense of smell, are loyal by nature, and have amazing powers of endurance. They are the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) search dogs. And some have been on the job since day one.

These amazing canines from New Zealand, Australia, Japan and Singapore are specially trained, along with their handlers, to locate people who are trapped after the collapse of buildings following events such as earthquakes, tornados and other natural and man-made disasters. Locating trapped victims quickly can save lives.

Taking care of the 28 USAR and NZ Police dogs has come under the guidance of the Massey University Veterinary Emergency Response Team (VERT).

Hayley Squance, director of the Massey University Veterinary Technology Programme and team leader for VERT, says this is the first time the team has been able to utilise their training for such an emergency. The team includes veterinarians Rachael Stratton, Jenny Nixey and Fred Pauwels.

Based from the SPCA Canterbury Animal Centre in Hornby, which is the earthquake response centre for animal welfare, the team is working alongside Animal Rescue units, local vets and SPCA staff.

The work of VERT includes assessing the needs of the dogs, attending to any injuries and giving advice to handlers on treatments and preventative care.

Dogs working in dangerous and dusty conditions often suffer from dehydration, bruises and scraped paws pads.

"We give them fluids, treat any injuries and also flush their eyes and noses out with saline solution," says Hayley. "They often need massage to ease their tense muscles so we are trained in animal physiotherapy too."

However, it's not all hard work for the dogs - they do get plenty of downtime with opportunities to have some fun with their handlers too.

"If there is an emergency with a dog, we'll treat it on site and then send it out to other veterinary clinics for followup care."

The team has had excellent support from Thrifty Rentals, who provided a utility vehicle, and veterinary suppliers Shoof, Provett and Massey University for equipment and medical supplies.

Hayley says that such a team with their level of expertise has never been used in New Zealand before. All four members trained together and are certified in Animal Rescue, which also includes valuable civil defense knowledge.

"We're developing and fostering good relationships with the international rescue teams and have already had requests to take our expertise out of New Zealand to train other vets in countries such as Australia, America and Asia."

Hayley has spent the past four years researching this area and has just completed her Masters thesis in Educational and Technical Requirements for Personnel Involved in Animal Welfare Emergency Management. She is also the National Animal Welfare Manager (NAWEM) author of the Guide to Companion Animal Disaster Management Planning.

The disaster is testing and putting her theories and management strategies to good use.

"It's an area that is gaining attention but still needs more research," says Hayley. "And it's an issue that the Civil Defense Emergency Management now understands has its place in rescue operations."

USAR dog Tommy is attended to by his Singaporean Rescue handlers and the VERT team. Pictured from left are Fred Pauwels, Glen Chow, Tommy (dog), Hayley Squance, Klevin See and Chu Keat. **Image supplied by Singapore USAR Media**

