



Overheated cars a K-9's worse enemy

3 police dogs in state died in last 2 years from heat

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In the last two years, overheated patrol cars have killed more Florida K-9's than gunfire, with the latest victim a Coral Springs police dog that died Wednesday.

Many local law enforcement agencies now rely on special car alarms that detect when the car's interior gets too hot for a dog, provided the car is functioning properly and the alarm is set.

On Wednesday afternoon, an undercover Coral Springs police officer left 8-year-old Heike in his unmarked car, but failed to leave the engine running and the alarm on, officials said. The officer returned about two hours later to find the female wire-haired terrier and Labrador mix dead.

"The officer is extremely distraught and upset," said Sgt. Joe McHugh, Coral Springs police spokesman. The department has launched an internal investigation, but McHugh said Heike's death appeared to be an accident.

At least two other Florida K-9 dogs have died the same way in the last two years, according to news reports and Web sites memorializing fallen K-9s.

In July, a police officer in Mulberry, near Lakeland, left a German shepherd in a patrol car with the engine running for several hours, but the air conditioner stopped working. The car was not fitted with a special alarm, and the dog succumbed to heat stroke.

In November 2006, a Broward Sheriff's Office bomb squad dog, Astro, died in an overheated patrol car while his deputy handler was in training. The air conditioner stopped working, but it was unclear why the special alarm in the cruiser did not sound, officials said.

During the same time period, two K-9s in Florida were shot to death while chasing suspects. One, a Broward Sheriff's Office K-9 named Oozi, was killed in July, likely the victim of friendly fire.

Heat-related deaths that happen in patrol cars are considered mostly preventable.

The problem led a Jupiter-based company, Radiotronics Inc. to develop special car alarms for K-9 units in 1986, under the brand AceK9.

Coral Springs police and the Broward Sheriff's Office are among local customers for the alarms, which cost about \$650 to \$1,200 each, depending on the features.

"With the heat in Florida, you have to keep the car running and the air conditioner operating for it to be safe for the dog," said Robert Dye, general manager of Radiotronics.

The company's alarms are designed to set off a police car's siren and flashing lights and sound the car horn in Morse code for "SOS" if it gets too hot inside, Dye said.

"All hell breaks loose," he said.