

For Jason Nielsen, "going to the dogs" was a possible solution out of difficult times.

A union laborer who had worked in the construction field for 12 years when he was laid off last winter, Nielsen was suffering from troubled thoughts and insomnia when he saw a television show at 3 a.m. that gave him an idea.

That's when Caddy, a 2-year-old Labrador retriever, came into his life.

Caddy is a certified narcotics detection dog, but he does not work for any police or sheriff's department. Instead, he is a partner in Nielsen's new business, K9 Solutions LLC of Portage.

Caddy, with a nose 400 times more powerful than a human's, is trained to detect the odors of marijuana, cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine; he is in the process of learning to detect oxycodone.

Nielsen and Caddy's services are available for hire to individuals, schools or businesses, allowing non-invasive, discrete and confidential drug detection. "I'll go anywhere," Nielsen said.

Caddy's services are a solution for parents to test for drug use by their children without a blood or urine test, while the children are out of the house, Nielsen said.

"Parents want to believe their kids are all good," Nielsen said. But often children are using drugs for two years or more before parents learn about it.

Caddy can detect marijuana smoke in clothes for two days after the clothes were near drugs.

Nielsen is not a law enforcement officer, however, and must obey privacy laws regarding searches. He leaves it up to the business owners, school administrators or parents to deal with what Caddy may find, with one exception: If Nielsen is shown methamphetamine, Wisconsin law requires that he immediately report it to law enforcement. Other drugs, however, do not need to be reported.

"It's the parent's discretion to do what they want," he said.

Nielsen purchased Caddy as a fully trained dog. Now 2, Caddy was bred and trained by Lori Peper-Rucks, owner and trainer of Sunshine Kennels & K-9 Training of Luck. Peper-Rucks trains police, search-and-rescue, and drug-sniffing dogs, and has been a professional dog trainer since 1975.

Nielsen spent seven days with Peper-Rucks, getting to know Caddy and learning how to handle and train him.

Searching for drugs is not work for Caddy, who has no idea he is searching for illegal drugs.

"That's fun time for him," Nielsen said.

Caddy responds to obedience commands - both verbal and by hand - and search commands. Nielsen hopes to become certified to carry small amounts of the real stuff, but meanwhile, he practices several times a week with a substitute for the illegal drugs the dog detects.

"The dog doesn't know the difference," Nielsen said.

Each substitute scent, a white powder, is put on a towel, which is rolled up into a ball and held together with color-coded rubber bands - Caddy has learned they are his "toys" and loves chewing on them, Nielsen said.

One command - "check" - is all it takes for Caddy to begin using his nose, with Nielsen watching.

"We're a team," Nielsen said. "We work together."

Nielsen, as a new dog owner, is learning to recognize Caddy's signals that he has found a "hit" - Caddy will use his nose to sniff the location, move his head away, then return again, trying to hone in on the exact location of the scent. The signal can be subtle - perhaps Caddy's nose lingering a second or two longer in one spot than any other.

"I literally have to trust the dog," Nielsen said. At 2 years of age, however, Caddy is still basically a puppy, still getting to know the outside world. He is skittish of loud noises and wary of large crowds.

"He's not a show dog, he's a working dog," Nielsen said.

To help with his skittishness, Nielsen keeps Caddy with him as much as possible, taking him out in public, to parks and restaurants, when allowed.

Twice since Nielsen has purchased him, Caddy has signaled "hits" - meaning that he has picked up the scent of illegal drugs - on strangers walking past Nielsen while they were out for a walk.

Privacy laws require him to ignore those hits. To those people, Nielsen merely tells them: "He's just overly friendly."

Caddy is now a solid member of Nielsen's family, although, to create a strong bond between them, only Nielsen is allowed to feed him, give him treats and give him commands.

"He's my buddy," Nielsen said. Nielsen said he is willing to work with local law enforcement.

Thus far, however, he has had few phone calls, although he has accomplished a lot of "foot pounding" by visiting area businesses.

"Everyone says it's a good idea," Nielsen said. "I like the idea of being able to help the community."

Meanwhile, Nielsen will continue to hone Caddy's abilities, although there is one slight hitch.

"I'm actually allergic to dogs," he said with a laugh.

The business is online at www.myk9solutions.com.