

**CRAWFORDVILLE**



Crawfordville veterinarian Norm Griggs will work the Iditarod Trail.

**Florida veterinarian heads north to Alaska for the Iditarod**

**KARL ETTERS**  
 USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Exchanging the warmth of Florida to spend nights in 25-below-zero weather along an Alaskan dogsled trail might not seem like a bucket list item to cross off.

But Norm Griggs can't wait to get there.

On Monday, the Crawfordville veterinarian leaves for The Last Frontier, where he will serve among the dozens of 2017 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race trail veterinarians tasked with keeping nearly 1,000 dogs healthy as they trek along the 1,100-mile trail. According to the event's website, 72 mushers are registered to compete.

As a rookie volunteer, Griggs will undergo a week of training to learn about the perils of the winding, snow-filled mountainous trail the dogs and their mushers will travel on.

Griggs, the lead veterinarian at Shepherd Spring Animal Hospital, applied two years ago but wasn't accepted. He received notice in October he would finally have the chance to work on the Iditarod.

"I'm kind of a dog guy. It basically comes down to my interest in dogs and performance dogs and the different things we use dogs for," Griggs said. "I just want to put my hands on a dog that can pull a sled for 1,100 miles as a team."

Vet checkpoints are set up every 100 miles or so along the route from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Nome. The health of the 16-dog teams is their utmost responsibility.

Griggs will be one of many who work around the clock in eight-hour shifts to evaluate the dogs and any injuries they experience. Each dog must be checked at each vet stop.

Shoulder injuries and joint pain are the most common problems, but keeping an eye out for symptoms stemming from heart disease — which could develop into a problem given the dogs' level of exertion — is also paramount.

"It's pretty highly organized and labor intensive too," Griggs said. "People that are worried about the dogs being abused in this thing, I think they'll appreciate the fact that the dogs are completely taken care of."

But he'll also be helping with more long-term research.

Vets will evaluate the dogs and their joints and collect samples along the way to detect physiological problems in dogs that tow sleds for long distances.

"It's an effort to further the science," Griggs said. "If we can use things like that as predictors, maybe mushers can train their dogs in a different way to condition them."

Griggs plans to document his experience using a GoPro camera. He intends to put together a presentation of the trip to show when he returns.

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