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Incident With Dog Leads To Policy Change, Training

By Amanda Rogers – August 12, 2014

An incident involving a Randall County Sheriff's deputy lethally shooting a dog has led to new policies and training measures.

On Tuesday Joel Richardson, Randall County Sheriff, held a press conference in reference to the encounter, which took place during the afternoon of July 23.

The sheriff's office received a call of dogs, belonging to Ryan and Toni Walker, running loose and on a neighbor's property in the area of the 22000 block of FM 1541.

In May one of the Walkers' other dogs had bitten a 16-year-old boy who lived in the complaining party's residence. Upon leaving the Walker's home, the investigating deputy, John Vaught, shot and killed a charging dog, an Australian Shepherd named Blue, at the Walker's residence in the front yard.

"This was an unfortunate incident, and I want to publicly express my sympathy and condolences to the dog's owners, Ryan and Toni Walker, as I know they considered Blue to be a member of their family," Richardson said.

"After reviewing the discharge of a firearm report, I have decided to change our policy regarding canine encounters. The new policy will be in effect after review by legal counsel. It will outline some specific actions and strategies that should help officers avoid using deadly force against canines."

Because deputies frequently come into contact with dogs each day, from making traffic stops, serving warrants and conducting interviews, Jim Osorio of Canine Encounters Law Enforcement Training of Arlington will conduct a training Oct. 13-14 at the Randall County Sheriff's Office. Osorio's program includes factors contributing to a dog bite, types of aggressive dogs, dog body language, encountering dogs on the job, report writing, use of force continuum, tools of the trade and self-defense against dogs.

"This training will give officers option and strategies in dealing with aggressive and dangerous dogs and the tools on how to best deescalate these situations," he said.

“It will also provide our officers with knowledge and tactics so they can better protect themselves, the citizens we serve and the dogs that officers encounter.”

Richardson said that the Facebook page “Justice for Blue” contains false statements regarding the incident. Because of those statements, Richardson showed the dash camera video from the incident to press during the conference.

“Specific statements indicating that the dog was ‘shot just for barking’ and that a ‘child was endangered’ by the shots that were fired, are both inaccurate,” Richardson said.

When Vaught arrived at the complainant’s house, the dogs were no longer there, according to a copy of the incident report provided by the Randall County Sheriff’s Office. The deputy then went to the Walkers’ home, and when he attempted to exit the vehicle two dogs appeared with one charging aggressively, according to the report. Vaught reported that he used pepper spray to protect himself, but it “had little effect on the dog.” He wrote that once he made contact with Toni Walker, the two dogs “became very friendly.”

The law states that dogs can run unconfined and without leashes if the owners provide a plot of land of at least 5 acres. The Walkers’ property meets that requirement, but a violation still occurs if the dogs leave the property, Richardson said.

The video shows the officer coming out the home, veer out the frame to avoid going near the dog, which was under a parked vehicle. The dog runs toward the officer, which is when shots were fired. However, the officer using his firearm cannot be seen in the video. Richardson said the officer fired five times and shot the dog twice. Toni Walker then comes out of the home holding a small child. Richardson said the dog was still alive, but Walker asked the officer to shoot Blue once more to humanely kill the animal.

“The next inaccuracy on the Facebook page is that I provided an ‘edited’ version of the dash camera footage to the Walkers. By design the dash camera footage cannot be edited, or it would be of no evidentiary value,” Richardson said.

In the video Toni Walker can be heard apologizing for being extremely upset, to which the officer replies that he understands. Before leaving the scene, Vaught can be heard asking Walker if she would like him to move the dog. She responded that she wanted to move him, and then asked Vaught to hold her 7-month-old son. Walker can then be seen picking up the dog and carrying it behind the home while Vaught follows her with the baby. Vaught then provided Walker with a card for the sheriff’s office should she need anything or have other concerns.

“The question isn’t whether or not this was a justified use of force; the question is ‘was it avoidable.’ My answer to that question is yes,” Richardson said.

Richardson said he was saddened by the incident, especially witnessing on the video a very upset Toni Walker carry Blue behind the house. He also said that he offered to buy the Walkers' a new dog, but was told their other dog was pregnant with puppies fathered by Blue. Richardson said he went to the Walkers' home and gave Toni Walker a \$500 check to cover veterinary expenses.

"I've been pretty blasted over that, but I did it out of the goodness of my heart," Richardson said.

The Walkers have stated they have no intention on cashing the check, but are looking into acquiring legal counsel.