** *Atlanta Police Department Creates Animal Cruelty Liaison Officer Position***



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**ATLANTA, GA** - The Atlanta Police Department today announced the creation of a sworn police officer position dedicated exclusively to pursuing and investigating animal cruelty crimes and reducing incidents of officer-involved dog shootings and dog attacks on people.

Chief Erika Shields announced the new position at a news conference today, introducing Senior Police Officer Amy Soeldner as the first officer to hold the position of Animal Cruelty Liaison Officer. Shields said the new position sends a strong message that the City of Atlanta cares about its animals and its children.

The need for such a position intensified after a January dog attack in which a 6-year-old boy was killed and a 5-year-old girl was seriously injured while walking to school in southwest Atlanta. The owner of the dog is facing criminal charges related to the attack.

“The horrific attack on these children in January underscored the need to hold owners accountable for the proper care and restraint of their dogs,” Chief Shields said. “We simply cannot tolerate irresponsible ownership of dogs, or cruelty toward any animal in the city. I truly believe there is a direct correlation between how a person treats animals and their propensity toward violence against humans. SPO Soeldner’s passion toward animal welfare will be a true asset for the people of the City of Atlanta and will surely benefit people and animals alike.”

The Animal Cruelty Liaison Officer will work closely with officers, investigators, prosecutors, the community and other government agencies such as Fulton County Animal Services to investigate animal cruelty crimes. Additionally, SPO Soeldner will work to educate young people on having empathy toward animals and work with police officers to educate them on the links between animal cruelty and other violent crimes such as domestic abuse.

SPO Soeldner has developed and conducted training since January 2015 at the Atlanta Police Academy on animal cruelty that is also aimed at reducing the number of lethal dog shootings by Atlanta police officers. According to APD statistics, in the 32 months prior to the training, APD officers shot 28 dogs, killing four. In the 32 months after the training, APD officers shot 15 dogs, killing none.

Atlanta City Council Member Carla Smith has been instrumental in working with APD and the animal welfare community to create the position.

“This position fosters a relationship with the communities, the police and the courts in sending a strong message that cruelty to animals is a crime that will not be tolerated or overlooked,” Council Member Smith said. “This position can also help create safer communities for children and the elderly. Loose animals and irresponsible pet owners are common in many neighborhoods and I’m pleased that SPO Soeldner will help give voice to those concerned about these issues.”

SPO Soeldner joined the Atlanta Police Department in 1995, working as a mobile patrol officer for most of her career. She is also a certified instructor for APD who created a Georgia Peace Officer Standards and Training Council-certified course entitled “Law Enforcement & Animal Encounters.” The course has been provided to Atlanta police officers and is also offered online for all peace officers through the Georgia Public Safety Training Center. SPO Soeldner was honored with the Humane Law Enforcement Award by The Humane Society of the United States and The National Sheriff’s Association for her work on animal welfare issues.

“I’m honored to be selected by Chief Shields to be the first officer to hold this position,” SPO Soeldner said. “I have no doubt that enforcement and education around animal cruelty issues will improve the quality of life for animals and people alike.”

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