



## PUNTA GORDA POLICE DEPARTMENT

---

*From the office of Thomas P. Lewis, Chief of Police*

August 11, 2016

As you are all aware, this has been a devastating time for the Knowlton Family and our community. As your Chief of Police, I accept full responsibility for the actions of my department and my officers. I am 100% accountable. On Tuesday evening, August 9<sup>th</sup>, our department hosted members of the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce for a Citizen Police Night. This program includes a presentation from me about our agency, a tour of the police department, a display of several specialty units, a taser demonstration, and a shoot/don't shoot role play activity. This program agenda has been successfully utilized by our department for several years for various community organizations.

The shoot/don't shoot role play was developed at this agency after watching it grow in popularity at other agencies across the country. These scenarios foster conversation between citizens and police about the how fast officers are required to make decisions in a use of force incident. Our department has conducted these role-playing exercises over the past two years, running over 12 separate participants safely through the scenarios. Obviously in this circumstance, something went terribly wrong.

When we realized that Mrs. Knowlton was hurt, police and rescue personnel immediately provided medical assistance in every attempt to save her life. Once she was transported, the scene was secured by my officers and I contacted the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) to respond and conduct an independent investigation into what occurred. I have placed Officer Lee Coel on administrative leave pending the outcome of that investigation.

While FDLE began their investigation I focused on crisis and grief assistance for everyone involved. For Mrs. Knowlton's family, this included providing the services of our police chaplain, offering them police escorts, while also respecting their privacy and grieving. The Critical Incident Stress Management Team was activated to address any needs of the first responders on scene.

The Center for Abuse and Rape Emergencies (C.A.R.E.) assisted in arranging counseling for the class participants as well as anyone else in the community who is in need. This counseling is free of any cost, and arrangements can be made by calling (941) 894-1794. They are also holding a community meeting to make long term counseling arrangements, which will take place on August 17, 2016, in the Laishley Community Room at Laishley Marina.

As we previously released, the officer involved in the shooting is Officer Lee Coel. Officer Coel was hired on March 17, 2014. He is the same officer who was involved in a canine apprehension

which occurred on October 30, 2015. As this has been the topic of many media requests, I want address that immediately following that canine apprehension and arrest, I ordered an internal affairs investigation, hired a certified courtroom canine expert to examine the details of the incident, and provided all of this information to the community. Officer Coel's ability to utilize his canine was suspended until the completion of the investigation. The independent canine expert determined that Officer Coel's actions in this incident did not violate our department's procedures or state statutes pertaining to use of force. Even in lieu of this expert's ruling, I changed our canine policy to restrict the use of the canine for criminal apprehension to ensure a similar situation would not occur again. Officer Coel's ability to use his canine was reinstated at the conclusion of that investigation, and he has continued his employment with our department in that assignment.

I recognize the desire for answers on what happened on Tuesday night. The investigation by FDLE to obtain those answers is ongoing and very active. We have faith that they will determine the facts surrounding the evening's tragedy. I encourage everyone to not spread misinformation or speculate on details that have not been confirmed by their investigation at this time. We expect their investigation to last several weeks, and we will notify and be completely transparent with the community when it concludes.

I cannot imagine the grief that the Knowlton family is experiencing. I am praying for them, and I am asking that you, as a community, continue to do the same.



Thomas P. Lewis  
Chief of Police