

Armstrong County District Attorney recognized by Orphans of the Storm of the Storm

Katie M. Charlton and county HPO Chris O'Donnell are working to launch a 'neighbor to neighbor' program

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Armstrong County Humane Police Officer (HPO) Chris Jirak O'Donnell (left) and Orphans of the Storm (OOTS) board member Liz White (right) presented a plaque of recognition to county District Attorney Katie Charlton on behalf of the Rayburn Township based facility, for her help in starting the county's new humane program.

Ever since her tenure began three years ago in 2018, Armstrong County District Attorney Katie Charlton has said it is an important cause for her and her office to build strong cases and prosecute those who abuse and neglect animals. That led Charlton to personally pay for the training of Chris Jirak O'Donnell at an 80-hour academy in Hershey, Pa., to enable the latter to become the newest Armstrong County humane police officer (HPO).

The academy gave O'Donnell training on companion and agricultural animals, Pennsylvania cruelty/neglect laws, and animal behavior and husbandry.

O'Donnell was officially appointed as county HPO on Nov. 25, 2020, by Armstrong County Court of Common Pleas Judge Chase G. McClister.

Since then, Charlton's office and O'Donnell have partnered with Rayburn Township based no-kill animal shelter Orphans of the Storm (OOTS), to work on a new humane program for the county.

On Monday, O'Donnell and OOTS board member Liz White presented a plaque of recognition to Charlton, on behalf of OOTS.

"Because of DA Charlton's support, our county now has a HPO to protect the animals in our community from cruelty, neglect, abandonment, dogfighting and other mistreatment," said Bethann Galbraith, OOTS shelter manager in a statement.

With the new HPO and humane program in the county, Charlton said, her office will be better equipped to deal with animal abuse cases in the county.

DA: Top-notch candidate in O'Donnell

Charlton said it was important to her to find a HPO candidate that was highly qualified and of high caliber, attributes she said O'Donnell typifies.

"I am so fortunate to have found a highly qualified, dedicated and motivated person for this position," Charlton said. "HPO O'Donnell has already been such an asset to Armstrong County law enforcement in just the first two months since she was sworn in."

Added Charlton: "(HPO O'Donnell) brings with her a wealth of knowledge and experience to this position and will assist in ensuring animal cruelty incidents are thoroughly investigated. I'm very excited to have this process in place for Armstrong County, and I wish to thank Orphans of the Storm for its role in making this happen."

Chief County Det. Eric Petrosky said O'Donnell is "top-notch" in her field, and added it is very important to have a new HPO in the county.

O'Donnell said she has been working and helping animals for more than 30 years, starting Animal Friends in Pittsburgh, and working with OOTS throughout her 20-plus years in Armstrong County.

She said she is grateful for the support from Charlton's office, as every time she gets a call, she either has a detective or other law enforcement official go out into the field with her.

Charlton said every law enforcement official who has gone out with O'Donnell has been impressed with her skill and dedication.

"It really is a partnership," O'Donnell said.

'Neighbor to neighbor' program conceived

O'Donnell said she wants to help educate people on the care and attention animals need as pets.

She said she has spent more time meeting with people in the community, the past few months, trying to help people understand the care animals need, rather than immediately write citations or file charges.

O'Donnell added she is starting to work on a "neighbor to neighbor" program in the county, that will allow people to help take care of animals from people who may be unable to properly care for them, such as those who are bedridden or elderly.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, O'Donnell added, she hopes to bring her dog, Charlotte, to schools to educate children on how to take care of pets.

"I look forward to educating people on how to take care of animals, offering assistance where needed, and enforcing our humane laws," O'Donnell said.

In order to start the new humane program, Charlton said they needed the support and sponsorship of an animal shelter, something White said OOTS was proud and happy to offer.

To learn more or report animal cruelty or neglect, visit: orphansofthestormpa.org/humaneprogram/.

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