

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

October 18, 2018

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:  
browlessr@yahoo.com**

Billy Rowles  
Sheriff  
Newton County Sheriff's Department  
110 E. Court Street  
Newton, TX 75966

Re: Unconstitutional use of prayer to address animal cruelty

Dear Sheriff Rowles:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to object to your office's use of a "prayer meeting" as an alternative to enforcing animal cruelty laws. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 32,000 members across the country, including more than 1,300 members in Texas. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that you recently submitted a report to local media summarizing the Sheriff's Office activities of the week.<sup>1</sup> The report included:

We received a call reporting that a lady dumped two puppies at the dump. We located her and had a prayer meeting with her. It's against the law to dump dogs. I don't think she will do it again.

This is alarming and unacceptable. Your office caught a woman committing a disgusting act of animal cruelty against two puppies and you not only failed to enforce the law, but you also chose to inject religion into your interaction with the offender. You owe all Newton County residents, especially nonreligious residents and those who care about animal welfare, an immediate apology. Further, FFRF requests written assurances that your office will not impose religion on citizens, or substitute prayer for punishment, in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Phoebe Suy, *Newton sheriff had 'prayer meeting' with woman who abandoned puppies*, CHRON.COM (Oct. 15, 2018), available at [www.chron.com/news/article/Newton-sheriff-had-prayer-meeting-with-woman-13308204.php](http://www.chron.com/news/article/Newton-sheriff-had-prayer-meeting-with-woman-13308204.php).

To many Americans, household pets are like family members. Puppies are perhaps the most beloved of all American pets, and Newton County residents deserve a sheriff who will protect these most vulnerable Newton County family members. Foregoing even a nominal punishment against a woman who abandoned two puppies in a dump sends a message that your office does not view this as a serious offense.

Elsewhere in your weekly report, you described instances of “hunters shooting very close to homes,” “thugs” who knocked windows out of vehicles, “animals” who scammed two elders out of their money, and a sexual assault of a child. If you caught any of these perpetrators, would a “prayer meeting” be a sufficient remedy? We hope the answer is “no,” and abandoning puppies or other forms of animal cruelty are no different. You were elected to enforce laws, not to pray with offenders and let them go without any consequences for their actions.

This religion-based downplaying of animal cruelty is especially inappropriate given the strong connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence.<sup>2</sup> This connection is so prevalent that it is referred to by many researchers as simply “the link.”<sup>3</sup> Upholding laws that protect animals in Newton County also protects the human residents of Newton County.

Your assertion that this instance of animal cruelty will not reoccur due to your office’s “prayer meeting” is naïve in the extreme. As the most recent revelations of the seemingly endless Catholic Church child sex abuse scandal has shown, praying with offenders does not stop criminal behavior. Priests across the world abused children in their care and were repeatedly told to pray over their transgression, told to ask God for forgiveness, and shuffled to new communities. Their new congregations were never told of their history of abuse because of the fantasy that prayers would correct their criminal behavior.<sup>4</sup> Your treatment of this offender is foolish for the same reason and betrays the trust that the people of Newton County have placed in you.

Finally, it is unconstitutional for law enforcement entities to condition any benefit or penalty on participation in religious exercises. *See Jackson v. Nixon*, 747 F.3d 544 (8th Cir. 2014); *Inouye v. Kemna*, 504 F.3d 705, 714 n.9 (9th Cir. 2007); *Warner v. Orange Cty. Dept. of Probation*, 115 F.3d 1068 (2nd Cir. 1997); *Kerr v. Ferrey*, 95 F.3d 472, 480 (7th Cir. 1996). It is illegal to

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Jeff Fink, *The Link: Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse*, WOMENSHEALTH.GOV (Nov. 7, 2017).

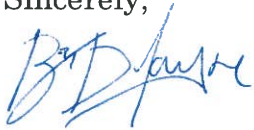
<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Sarah Pulliam Bailey and Stefano Pitrelli, *Pope Francis acknowledges Catholic Church’s bad practices during the sex abuse crisis*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Sept. 21, 2017).

coerce individuals whom your office has caught breaking the law into participating in prayers with you or your officers. To avoid punishment, offenders who do not share your personal religious beliefs will nevertheless feel compelled to participate in the religious exercise. One-quarter of Americans are nonreligious,<sup>5</sup> and it is unconstitutional for your office to offer them leniency if they engage in a “prayer meeting” with you or your officers.

We urge you to apologize to the residents of Newton County for this poor judgment, and to take animal cruelty more seriously in the future. We also request a written response with assurances that your office will not engage in prayer or other religious activities with criminal suspects or other members of the public in the future.

Sincerely,



Ryan D. Jayne  
Staff Attorney

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<sup>5</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf)