

## SERVICE

# New effort at the Virginia Beach police mounted patrol facility in Pungo offers therapeutic riding for public safety personnel

BY JOHN-HENRY DOUCETTE

## PUNGO

Two years ago, Virginia Beach experienced the mass shooting at its municipal center in the Courthouse area, both a collective tragedy and the source of an untold number of individual tragedies.

The Friday, May 31, 2019, event is a milestone in the lives of the city, its citizens and the people who comprise the city workforce — including the public safety personnel who responded to it and who have kept serving Virginia Beach through all that has happened since. This includes civil unrest and the novel coronavirus pandemic.

In the weeks after the mass shooting, members of the Virginia Beach Police Mounted Patrol — meaning, the police officers who ride horses — noticed how police, fire, emergency medical services and other city workers reacted to the horses when they rode in the Courthouse area.

The patrol is perhaps best known for appearances at community events and its summertime work as a stabilizing presence on busy nights at the Oceanfront resort. At the municipal center, officers noticed how well people responded to the horses. The patrol even invited workers to simply come out and pet the horses. It was a positive experience during difficult days.

At roughly the same time, the therapeutic riding charity Equi-Kids, which has an affiliate program called Equi-Vets to help wounded veterans, saw similar need and the potential to use their expertise to address issues for public safety personnel. Equi-Kids is a premiere accredited therapeutic riding center certified by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International. Among other efforts, Equi-Kids has had a therapeutic riding program for local emergency medical services personnel. There is a longtime partnership between the mounted patrol and the charity.

Now that relationship will provide a therapeutic riding program to police who may be dealing with issues related to their work. Members of the patrol and Equi-Kids gathered at the patrol's facilities in Pungo on Wednesday, Sept. 15, to prepare for the upcoming program. Officers from the patrol will be right alongside the participants, and they will work hand-in-hand with Equi-Kids instructors.

"This is going to be the first of its kind in the country," said Kathy Chitwood, program director for Equi-Kids and Equi-Vets. She said the charity reached out about working with first responders in 2019, and she noted the partnership is a natural one because the



- Above, members of the Virginia Beach Police Mounted Patrol and Equi-Kids practice an emergency dismount while preparing for a new therapeutic riding program for police officers.
- Below, Equi-Kids and Equi-Vets program director Kathy Chitwood said the charity and patrol have long had a partnership and want to help public safety personnel.
- Below right, Master Police Officer Joel Gough, seen with Big Busta, said the patrol and the charity started working toward the program in the wake of the 2019 mass shooting in Virginia Beach.



patrol and the charity "have been friends for years."

"We're very excited," said Candyce Boykin, the Equi-Kids volunteer coordinator and an instructor. "We hope it will be beneficial for everyone who is participating."

The effort is a culmination of two years of discussion and planning. Master Police Officer Joel Gough, a longtime member of the patrol, said he thought there was a way

to provide something to the first responders who work with the patrol's officers.

"After May 31, we had a lot of officers having issues," Gough said. "We just wanted to do something that was us helping us."

"They do have a lot of experience with veterans," said Master Police Officer Aaron Dove, speaking of the Equi-Vets effort. "Police and veterans have a lot in common."

Officers from the patrol will work with

the charity to meet weekly with an initial group of six officers who applied for the program. The pilot program is expected to last six weeks. It may expand over time to assist other public safety personnel and perhaps more people from the city workforce.

"They want this to continue and build out in the city," Dove said, stressing that the effort is not meant to be invasive in any way for its participants, some of whom could be reticent to talk about issues. It's supposed to be a safe place for police, who, as he noted, can sometimes be a closed-mouth bunch.

"For some of them to even sign up for this is a big deal," Dove said.

People from the charity and the patrol gathered at the mounted patrol facility in Pungo on Wednesday, Sept. 15, to walk through roles, facilities, procedures — and the simple mechanics of how they will work together when the program begins.

"Next month is when the participants actually start to come," Master Police Officer Justin Saunders, a member of the patrol, said during the run-through. "We're just trying to iron out the details today."

They went over big picture stuff, such as assessing how people are responding to the horses — how comfortable they are — and how to adjust to what they see during the sessions to make the next one better.

"Usually, when we're done, we like to get everybody back in a group to debrief," Chitwood told the officers. "You are going to see things in the ring that we don't see — this worked, this didn't work."

They went over other details, too, including safety protocols related to Covid-19 and assessing the inventory of safety gear.

"How about helmets?" Chitwood asked.

"The ones we have are pretty old, except the ones we use," Dove said.

"That's Oceanfront sweat," Master Police Officer John Jordan quipped.

"Well, we have helmets we can bring," Chitwood said. "We can sanitize them."

And how to lead and walk with riders, even where to keep hands to give the rider space while remaining in a position to keep them safe while they ride.

"Maybe when we're done talking, we can get a horse out," Chitwood said.

"That would be perfect," Dove said.

Officers saddled up one of the horses, Big Busta, and led him from the barn to a ring outside. Among other things, they practiced an emergency dismount — getting someone off the horse safely, how to support them, who does what. Dove slid off the horse to the side, and Beth Yurkovac, senior riding instructor for the charity, and others got him

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## Mounted Patrol: Police, charity team up for therapeutic riding program in Pungo

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onto the ground.

And they walked through scenarios, including working with people with varied experience riding — start close, then give the rider some room. The instructors from the charity showed where to stand, how to lead, how to walk alongside them.

“The goal is to get them off lead,” said Lisa Jankowski-Monette, the barn manager and an instructor for Equi-Kids and Equi-Vets, during the training effort in the ring. “Make them independent riders.”

One of the participants in the upcoming program is a veteran Virginia Beach officer who is active in peer support efforts within the department and an outside support group for first responders. *The Independent News* is not identifying the officer because they are participating in a program that assures people of their privacy.

Following the May 31, 2019, tragedy, the officer said, the department has placed a greater emphasis on peer support and dealing with effects of physical and mental

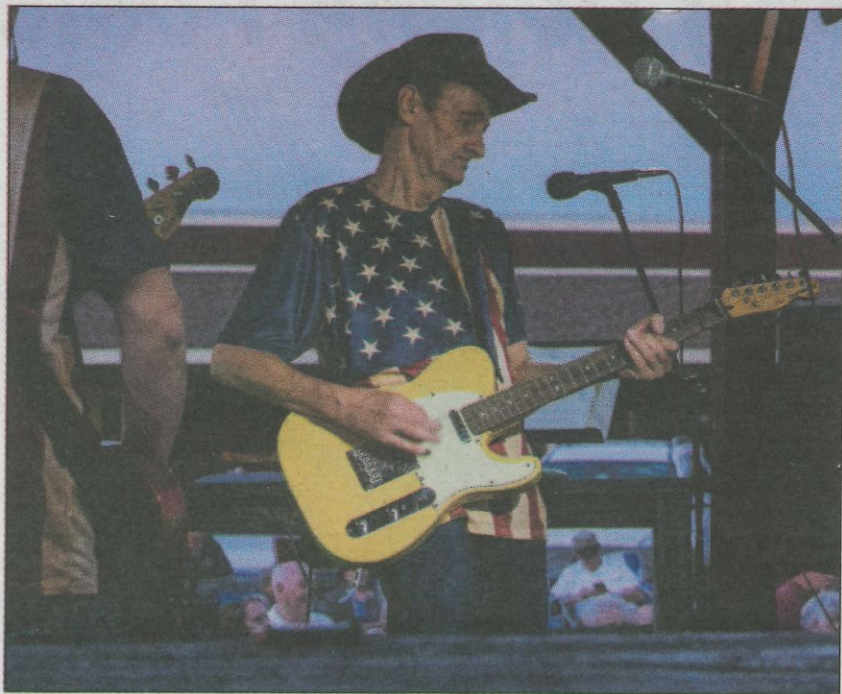
trauma or stress that is part of police work.

“Doing the job we do, sometimes the things we see — for instance going back to work and going to your first bad accident scene — can trigger things with you,” the officer said.

The officer is excited to go through the program because contact with animals, to them, is therapeutic — and they want to experience the program and be able to talk about its benefits with other people it could help. Sometimes people have professional concerns about seeking help. Dealing with issues is better than bottling things up, the officer said, because it is normal to have a response to difficult aspects of the job.

“If we don’t deal with that, it’s going to make us sick either physical or mentally,” the officer said. “I’m just passionate about making sure people know there are outlets, and they can break that stigma (of seeking help). ... It’s just the culture. We’re trying to change that culture because it can really help and change the lives of the people who are doing these jobs.”

### MUSIC AT THE MARKET



Michael Schmitt/For The Independent News

**B**illy Feserman, a vocalist and guitarist in East Coast Band, performs with his bandmates during the Friday Night Hoedown at the Virginia Beach Farmers Market on Friday, Sept. 3. The hoedowns are a free concert series Fridays at the market at the intersection of Dam Neck and Princess Anne roads through the end of October. East Coast Band is scheduled to perform again on Friday, Oct. 15.



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