

Citizens urged to pray for Covington officer - Newton Citizen, The (GA) - September 5, 2018

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COVINGTON - Calling Covington employees her family, City Manager Leigh Anne Knight stated that when she got the call that Covington Police Officer Matt Cooper had been shot Monday, it hurt deeply.

Knight, along with the City Council and mayor, expressed their feelings about Cooper and the shooting incident on Sept. 3 during the council's meeting Tuesday night. Council member Susie Keck was out of town.

Cooper, 34, and another officer responded to a shoplifting call at the Walmart on Industrial Boulevard Monday at about 12:24 p.m. where three male suspects were encountered in the shopping center parking lot. The three were reportedly attempting to steal bandannas.

According to Capt. Ken Malcom, the two younger suspects were apprehended, but a third fled across Industrial Boulevard and ran behind the Little Phillies shopping center that is adjacent to a wooded area. Cooper and the other officer pursued him, with one going around the rear of the shopping center from the east and the other from the west. Malcom said the officer approaching from the east side heard a gunshot and found Cooper wounded and unconscious.

The suspect's body was found a short time later in the wooded area. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation said preliminary findings indicate **Aaron Demonta Fleming**, 21, died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He was armed with a .38 revolver, according to police.

Cooper is currently in serious condition at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta with a bullet lodged next to the carotid artery. Doctors are determining the best way to remove the bullet without damaging the artery.

Knight said city employees feel like family members to each other, and that the shooting of Cooper by a suspect following a foot chase hit her "family" hard.

"Yesterday was, for most of us, one of the hardest, if not the hardest days we have had to endure as a city employee," she said. "A little bit of our joy is gone as we wrap our heads around how our fellow employee is fighting for his life after trying to protect those in our community. We have found ourselves pausing during the day to talk about Matt, pray for Matt and his family and our first responders."

Knight went on to ask the community to do three things in the aftermath of what has happened.

"Most importantly, remember Matt and his family in your prayers," said Knight. "His condition is critical and he has a tremendous battle in front of him. But Matt is a tough guy. He is an armed

forces veteran, a veteran police officer and we know he is fighting harder than ever right now.

"Remember all of our police officers and public safety personnel in your thoughts and prayers. It should be evident now more than ever just how real the danger of their job is.

"Be thankful for the service of our officers and public safety employees," she continued. "They patrol the streets at 3 a.m. while we are sleeping, putting in the work to keep Covington safe for us. Obviously risking their lives every minute they are on their shift for us. We need to let them know we realize their sacrifice and appreciate it.

"So please... take a minute next time you see an officer and introduce yourself and thank them for laying their life on the line for you. Then stop for a second and think about how fortunate we are to have officers risk their lives for the safety of people they don't know. It is a privilege."

Michael Whatley watched Cooper growing up and said Cooper is one of his son's dear friends. Whatley said the only thing he (Whatley) and others can do right now is pray.

"I do believe that prayer works," said Whatley... "That's all I can do, and I hope that if you think there is nothing you can do, just sit back and say 'Well, I can pray.' If that's all you can do, that's enough. Let's get this boy back on his feet."

Anthony Henderson, who works for the Newton County Sheriff's Office, said he doesn't know Cooper personally, but he has seen him in the community. He added that as a member of law enforcement, he understands the sacrifices first responders make and urged the community to continue to pray and support Cooper and his family.

"To his family, we're rooting for you," he said. "I know he is strong, I know he is a warrior; he has done his part to serve our country and he does a great job in our community."

Kenneth Morgan noted that he was shopping in Walmart on Monday when the incident happened, but did not know an officer had been shot until afterwards. He said it is unfortunate that it takes an incident like this to bond a community together.

"There is a lot of work that still has to be done, but I think this shows the leadership of our city and the community togetherness, because we have bonded together as a city," said Morgan. "We haven't made any reference or anything out of character; we have bonded together, the only thing we know that we can do for our community."

Josh McKelvey said when he received the phone call about the shooting, it was like being punched in his gut.

"My heart definitely goes out to his family and parents and to the community," he said. "We've been in constant prayer since that happened. I was at my church this afternoon and I saw people coming in and out of the sanctuary, just dropping off cards and getting on our knees to pray... I want him and his family to know that the whole community is behind him and we're rooting for and pulling for him and know that he is going to get through this and it will be an amazing story to tell."

Hawnethia Williams said the shooting hit her as hard as it has others and urged residents to use this chance to bond together and remain together as a community.

"Sometimes it takes this kind of tragedy for us to come together as we know we should as human beings," said Williams. "It is something that we need to learn - that we all bleed the same color blood. That we have more things in common than we have in terms of differences. We all grieve together for a person that sometimes we don't know, but is another human being that was created by the same God that created us all... We need to remember that, and not just in times of tragedy."

Mayor Ronnie Johnston agreed with others about continuing to bond as a community in praying for Cooper.

"My challenge to this community is that Matt can get a statue made of him for being the guy that led us down a path of really truly coming together and sustaining that for a long period of time," said Johnston... "We need to take Matt's courage and inspiration to a whole other level. Covington is a special place, and we do care about each other."

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