

Durham cop who took kitten from drug user's home faces possible discipline

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Durham Regional Police Const. Beth Richardson, seen with a cat, is facing a tribunal for taking a kitten from a drug user's home without permission or alerting her superiors. (Supplied)

An award-winning Durham Regional Police officer who rescued a “cowering” kitten from a stoned pet-owner’s home will face a police tribunal on Monday, charged with discreditable conduct.

Const. Beth Richardson is accused of “removing a kitten from a residence without the owners’” knowledge or consent on Jan. 12, 2016.

“She was dispatched as a back-up officer to attend an Oshawa home to check on the well-being of a female who had been using drugs (crystal meth) for several days,” the notice of hearing says, adding Richardson “observed a kitten cowering under a table and (believed) it was not being properly cared for.”

She then allegedly removed the kitten — named Tia — but did not let her supervisor or any other officers know, nor did she document the fact she had taken the cat from the owners.

“Const. Richardson had the kitten taken to a veterinarian for a medical check-up where it was medically cleared,” the hearing notices says.

This Police Services Act offence could land Richardson a demotion if the tribunal decides she was in the wrong.

The 17-year veteran has had no prior complaints and is very allergic to cats. She has a recent commendation for saving a man’s life by staunching the bleeding from a slash to his throat until paramedics arrived.

The calico kitten was filthy, smelled like smoke, and looked very skinny, according to Richardson’s lawyer, Joseph Markson, adding that when police arrived, the cat’s owner was hysterical, screaming, throwing things around, and pulling things off the wall.

“The kitten appeared to be underweight, neglected and had runny eyes. Her food and water dishes were empty and looked as if they had been dried up for days,” Markson said.

“The owner was in a drug-induced frenzy and my client reasonably believed that the kitten was suffering and in immediate danger of being hurt. My client even arranged and paid for the kitten to be examined by a veterinary clinician,” he said, adding that it was Richardson’s intention to take Tia to the humane society when it opened the next morning.

SUN+ nt is only guilty of caring for the plight of this poor animal and doing a good deed.”

The notice of hearing indicates the boyfriend of the kitten owner called police in the hours following the visit from officers and demanded the return of the kitten. He also said he wanted the officer charged with theft, alleging it was “caught on tape.”

The kitten was returned to the owner, who opted not to lay a charge, the hearing notice says.

ANIMAL RIGHTS GROUP PRAISES COP

Animal Justice Canada is seeking intervenor status at Const. Beth Richardson’s police tribunal because the legal advocacy group believes it’s a precedent-setting case.

“We believe this hearing is the first time a tribunal has considered a case in which an animal’s interest in being free from harm is relevant to (whether) ... an officer’s actions constitute discreditable conduct,” says the group’s written application to be heard at the Durham Regional Police tribunal scheduled to begin Monday.

Richardson is accused of discreditable conduct under the Police Services Act for taking a kitten named Tia from a home during a call because she felt it was in danger but failing to document it as well as not telling her supervisor, fellow officers or the cat’s owner.

“We are extremely concerned that the prosecution of (Const.) Richardson will have a chilling effect on police officers and citizens who discover animals in distress such as Tia,” Camille Labchuk, a lawyer and the executive director of Animal Justice Canada, said in an interview.

Finding Richardson guilty of discreditable conduct “could deter officers from rescuing animals from distressing emergency situations, for fear that they will be prosecuted,” their application says. “From the perspective of Tia, other custodians of animals and public members generally, the conduct of (Const.) Richardson was exactly the opposite (of discreditable conduct) — rather the coming to the aid of Tia raises or enhances the reputation of the police force.

“The police service exists not only to prevent and investigate crime but also to help the most vulnerable members of our society — including animals,” stated the application.

The allegation also treats the removal of Tia as “theft. In our view, Tia should not be viewed as simple property akin to a piece of furniture.”

Animal Justice Canada argues Tia’s owners were obliged to care for her and when she was placed at risk, her temporary custody by the police officer shouldn’t be viewed as theft.

The group received intervenor status in a B.C. bestiality case heard last year at the Supreme Court of Canada.

The group argued that vulnerable animals should also be protected from abuse by people and bestiality isn’t simply a crime against public morals.

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