

Press Release

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Executive Director Joseph Occhipinti proudly announced that after three hours of deliberation, a jury at the U.S. District Court in Camden, New Jersey returned a non-guilty verdict for federal civil rights charges against Det. Sterling Wheaten.

BACKGROUND

On June 15, 2013, Atlantic City (NJ) Det. Sterling Wheaten and his Police K-9 dog “Hagan” responded to an officer assist call involving an intoxicated suspect who was resisting arrest. Det. Sterling directed his K-9 partner to engage the suspect to enable officers to effect the arrest. During the struggle, the suspect punched and began strangling Hagan in the neck which resulted in his receiving bite marks.

The case was presented to a state grand jury by the Atlantic County Prosecutor’s Office who confirmed that Det. Wheaten followed appropriate police action. The grand jury similarly agreed and filed no charges against Det. Wheaten. Despite being cleared of alleged wrongdoing, the U.S. Department of Justice decided almost five years later to indict Det. Wheaten on federal civil rights charges.

On February 17, 2022, a federal jury at the U.S. District Court in Camden, found Det. Wheaten not-guilty of civil rights charges and filling a false police report. It should be noted that this was a landmark prosecution that sent a chilling message to K-9 police officers nationwide that they could be federally prosecuted if a suspect resists arrests which results in a K-9 police dog bite. Fortunately, truth and justice prevailed for Det. Wheaten.

Special Congratulations to Det Wheaten’s defense team, Stacy Biancamano, Esq. and Louis Barbone, Esq. from Cranford , New Jersey.

CONCLUSION

The NPDF established a legal defense fund for Det. Sterling Wheaten, who was suspended without pay since his indictment and was credited for raising much needed funds for his defense. In addition, the NPDF recognizing the New Jersey State PBA President Patrick Colligan for similarly supporting Det. Wheaten and referring the case to the NPDF.

This acquittal demonstrates the NPDF’s commitment to support law enforcement officials when it appears their prosecution may have been selectively prosecuted for serious felony crimes arising out of their official duties.

The End