



STEVE UECKERT / CHRONICLE

SUITING UP: Metro police officer John Wiggins puts a bullet-proof vest on his partner, Vigo, an explosives and patrol dog.

Woman's sympathy leads to dog gear

■ Metro police get Kevlar vests for 4-legged partners in national effort

By KEVIN MORAN
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Watching a television news program five years ago, Susie Jean was horrified by videotape of a police dog suffering a fatal gunshot wound while helping to catch a criminal.

That same night from her home in Georgia, the Houston native started a campaign that has resulted in the outfitting of 83 police K-9 unit dogs from Alaska to Georgia with specially tailored bulletproof vests.

On Thursday, Jean presented seven vests to the Houston Metro Police Department, giving all but the newest of the transit authority's patrol dogs protection from guns, knives and other deadly weapons that

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After seeing a news report of a K-9 dog's death, Susie Jean said she immediately called the Douglasville department and learned that its three K-9 unit dogs had no protective gear.

■ **Vests:** Jean said she raised money to buy the Georgia dogs protective vests and since has presented them to police departments in Alabama, Alaska, California, Colorado, New Mexico, North Carolina and Texas.

■ **More information:** www.vestnmdp.com

might cost the dogs or their handlers their lives.

The department acquired an eighth dog since the Houston outfitting effort began, and Jean said she's hoping local residents will donate the \$700 needed to protect the newest recruit.

The first agency that benefited from her 2002 founding of the nonprofit Vest 'n P.D.P. Inc. was the Douglasville Police Department in Georgia, Jean said.

Metro K-9 unit dogs are the first in the area to get the new vests and modeled them Thurs-

day during a demonstration. Each dog's vest bears its name embroidered on one side and the Metro police logo on the other, said officer Dennis Ribeiro.

The vests are made of Kevlar, he said.

Jean, who still owns property in Houston but lives in Socorro, N.M., said cash and in-kind donations such as embroidery work keep her K-9 protection effort running.

"One guy donated the Web site and I basically get everything done for free, so 99.9 per-

cent of the money goes toward these vests," said Jean, a retired hair stylist and owner of four dogs.

The vests that now will protect Metro's dogs cost the transit authority nothing, said Ribeiro, who runs the K-9 unit.

Officers and their dogs aren't always on buses and light rail, but they regularly patrol bus transfer stations and rail platforms, Ribeiro said.

Since Metro's K-9 unit formed in 1998, no dog has suffered serious injuries, Ribeiro said.

"We've had a couple of dogs roughed up while struggling with a suspect, but we haven't had any dogs that had to be taken out of service because of injuries," said Ribeiro.

Metro K-9 trainer John Ivey was the first to learn of the New Mexico nonprofit's police dog protection program, Ribeiro said.

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