

June 10, 2009

Mary Verner
Mayor
City of Spokane
808 W. Spokane Falls Blvd.
Spokane, WA 99201-3333

cc: City Council members

Re: Independent Investigative Authority for Police Ombudsman

Dear Mayor Verner,

We know that public safety is one of your highest priority commitments as a public leader. Toward that same goal, we write as organizations committed to achieving real police accountability for the people of Spokane. For the Police Ombudsman to be credible and effective, he/she must be able to conduct investigations independently of the Spokane Police Department and issue public reports. Otherwise, this position, which has potential to heal, will be a waste of time and public money and will only deepen distrust between citizens, the police, and the city itself. We believe that it is critical to "fix it before you fill it," as many of us said together at a recent press conference.

You know the history; in 2007 the Peace and Justice Action League, the ACLU and the League of Women Voters co-convened a series of community forums on police accountability. As a result of these forums PJALS proposed an ordinance to the Spokane City Council to create an Office of Ombudsman with the explicit authority to conduct independent investigations, as the city's own report recommended and as was endorsed by both the Chief of Police and the Mayor's Office. The proposed ordinance used the very successful City of Boise Police Ombudsman office as its model. However, in April 2008, the agreement the city reached with the Spokane Police Guild stripped the Ombudsman office of any independent investigative powers.

We continue to call for independent investigative authority in the office of the Police Ombudsman. We believe that this authority is necessary to fix the problem before this position is filled. We have seen statements made by city officials and attributed to you in the media about waiting a year or two to see how the office operates before making changes. This approach not only lacks fiscal responsibility but does nothing to address the continued mistrust by the public of the Spokane Police Department and ultimately, the City of Spokane. You have the opportunity now to make a strong and positive difference by assuring real accountability in the Spokane Police Department.

We have seen a very troubling pattern in Spokane: a horrible incident of misconduct or racism, followed by public outrage, followed by reform that lacks meaning. After the recent incidents including the cases of Otto Zehm, Josh Levy, and Shonto Pete among others, we cannot accept less than the real accountability and independent investigations that our community deserves, especially as we approach the window of contract negotiations with the Police Guild.

Since the Police Guild contract negotiations will begin this summer, *now is the time to fix this position*. The City's own report as well as the common sense and common outrage of this community calls for true independence and true authority. The recent police internal investigation clearing its dispatch supervisor, Marvin Tucker, of questionable actions in the Jay Olsen trial of the shooting of Shonto Pete only furthers our belief that independent authority is necessary. The public only views this as another example of police investigating police and clearing themselves of wrongdoing. The public gives this internal process no credibility and sees this as business as usual in Spokane. Just because you didn't see public outrage following that report does not mean people believed it, only that we expected it.

The model of independent, publicly reported investigations of police conduct and practice has been successful in Boise and is no less than what our many communities in Spokane deserve. At the very least, we want you to commit now, before filling the position, to using this round of negotiations with the Police Guild to change the scope of the Police Ombudsman position to include those independent and publicly reporting authorities.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at your convenience to discuss these matters and to hear your plans to improve the office of the Ombudsman. We thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Peace and Justice Action League of Spokane

SHAWL (Sovereignty, Health, Air, Water, Land) Society

Inland Northwest Business Alliance

Progressive Democrats of America, Spokane Chapter

National Alliance on Mental Illness, Spokane chapter

NAACP of Spokane

Voices for Opportunity, Income, Childcare, Education, and Support (VOICES)

M.E.Ch.A. of EWU

M.E.Ch.A. of WSU

Odyssey Youth Center