



Madison Professional Police Officers Association

Local No. 1, Wisconsin Professional Police Association

PO. Box 1188
Madison, Wisconsin 53701

Dear Mayor Rhodes-Conway,

After receiving a great deal of feedback from the officers I represent, I write to convey some serious concerns on the part of the MPPOA membership related to your blog dated August 6, 2019.

In your blog, you make the following statement about a Madison police officer's handling of a mental health call for an African-American 17-year-old in mental health crisis that occurred in June: "The officer's actions may or may not have violated the law; and may or may not have violated MPD policy; however, police actions in this incident are not and will never be acceptable as best practice in the City of Madison." You also state that you are "painfully aware of the harm caused when our City police accountability processes seem to protect the rights of our officers but lack the transparency and accountability to provide our community a sense of justice."

The judgmental statements in your blog entry are of enormous concern to our members - the dedicated men and women that work to protect our community. As you well know, and as your blog even acknowledges, an independent review of the incident you reference has been initiated and is well underway. For you to have rendered such judgments about the actions of a police officer in an incident - presumably on the basis of a singular, incomplete video - while that incident is under investigation, is extraordinarily disappointing. Your statements not only risk influencing the outcome of that external review, they also threaten to influence the public's perception surrounding this incident, without the benefit of the additional information that the external review might provide.

Additionally, with respect to your comments intimating some failure on the part of the Police & Fire Commission - which doesn't even have this matter before them does nothing to cultivate a responsible public discourse. Would you suggest that we dispense with an external review (after all, you have already registered your belief that the outcome of that review doesn't really matter) and fire the officer involved on the basis of how badly a video clip of the incident looked on the news? I certainly hope not. Just as a criminal defendant must be given the presumption of innocence pending a complete investigation and trial, so should officers under scrutiny for their line-of-duty actions.

Another significant concern that has been shared with me and other MPPOA leaders is the likelihood that your comments create doubt and hesitation in the minds of officers. As you should know, an officer can quickly find himself or herself in a situation that requires them to make split-second decisions to protect themselves and others.

What should our officers take away from your most recent blog? Despite how the laws, rules, policies, and training might ordinarily govern their actions, should they now be told to first ask themselves “What would Mayor Rhodes-Conway do?” Regardless of how a full set of facts might be needed to evaluate an officer’s conduct, should the PFC limit its consideration to how the video of an incident might come off on the nightly news?

Without a doubt, the public has every right to question the manner in which officers do their jobs, but bridging any gap between law enforcement and the community it serves depends upon our collective ability to have an informed public dialogue. Policing generally and an officer’s use of force specifically can be complicated and multifaceted topics, and you have done them and the profession - along with the hopes for a thoughtful public dialogue on these issues - a significant disservice.

While your blog talks much about fair treatment and a sense of justice, that is exactly what your words served to deny the men and women who risk their lives to protect this community. In rendering your judgments on the basis of limited information, you have served to undermine the external investigation that is ongoing and incorrectly disparaged the credibility of the public body that oversees the Madison Police Department.

When we endorsed your candidacy, we were attracted to what you held out to be a genuine interest in communication and collaboration. We believed you would prioritize good results above reactionary rhetoric. Perhaps above all, we hoped that you would be a unifying leader that could bring law enforcement together with its harshest critics to undertake a meaningful conversation on how we can effectively work with one another to strengthen the MPD’s ability to keep Madison safe while safeguarding the rights of all those who live and work here. We remain hopeful and ready to work with you and your office should you decide to pursue such an approach.

Thank you.

Kelly Powers
MPPOA President