

## **Open Letter to Ceasefire Working Group and Others**

October 26, 2011

Dear City Manager Lindsay, Richmond City Council Members, Director Boggan, and Members of the Ceasefire Working Group:

Recent events involving the Richmond Police Department (RPD) and the Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS) have raised a number of important questions and undermined the confidence some community residents have in our ability to work together effectively within the City to reduce violence. I am deeply frustrated by this because I believe both RPD and ONS have made significant strides over the past several years to engage the community in successful violence-reduction efforts. Both the Police Department and ONS have highly committed, active, and hard-working employees, who have been doing their best to diminish gun violence in our city, albeit through different methods and sometimes with different resources. The common resource we both rely on, however, is the confidence and trust of the community. When this trust is compromised, our shared mission becomes more difficult to achieve and we lose the public's support.

On Friday, October 14th, a fight between individuals from two rival neighborhood groups took place at City Hall in the Office of Neighborhood Safety when some of these individuals inadvertently came in contact with one another. When officers responded to the scene, they discovered broken items, overturned furniture, and a large amount of blood suggesting a more serious assault might have taken place. In addition, it was clear that multiple individuals involved in the incident had left the scene prior to the officers' arrival. The responding officers, including a supervisor, began questioning the staff and others from ONS who were still present.

A little history may be helpful at this point. Several years ago when the position of "Neighborhood Change Agent" (NCA) was created within the ONS, RPD played a key role in establishing a set of protocols to address how NCAs and the Police Department could interact when necessary and avoid situations where the safety of the NCAs would be compromised. This involved establishing one or more liaisons from the PD who could be contacted as needed by the ONS Director or other ONS personnel should situations arise when it was necessary or appropriate to exchange information. Typically, this communication involved general concerns about when the streets were "heating up,"

rumors about things going on at the neighborhood level, or specific concerns about safety. NCAs are justifiably concerned about being perceived as agents of the police (and for the record, once again, they have no connection with the PD)—so the hope was that this “liaison” process could address these concerns.

For the most part, the liaison process and the existing protocols between RPD and ONS have worked well, however the incident on Friday the 14th was somewhat different than what these protocols had previously been used to deal with. First, the responding patrol officers were not well versed in the protocol process, since the primary liaison with ONS in the past was a lieutenant assigned to the Police Department’s Special Investigations Section (SIS). Most of the interactions between ONS and the liaison were confidential, so it would be unusual for patrol personnel to be aware of them. Secondly, the Police Department hadn’t envisioned the protocols would apply to situations involving a crime that had just occurred in the City Hall offices of the ONS, where there was the possibility of serious injuries and there was one or more perpetrators outstanding. The responding officers expected full access to all ONS personnel and others present at the scene for immediate interviews, so they were surprised and unhappy when the individuals present were unwilling to speak with them--instead referring them to the ONS Director (who was not present or immediately available). Their reports clearly reflect these frustrations.

I believe a series of mistakes and miscommunications, directly and peripherally related to this incident, took place involving Police Department personnel. I would like to extend my apologies and **accept full responsibility for these mistakes**, which include the following:

- In response to media inquires, spokespersons for the Police Department incorrectly stated that the Department was not receiving any cooperation from the ONS. In fact, the protocols as they currently exist were largely followed. This misstatement of information was not intentional or malicious, but rather was the result of a breakdown in communication within the Police Department. To the degree that this has harmed the credibility or reputation of the ONS Director, I am deeply sorry. I believe this communication breakdown highlights the importance of reevaluating if the existing protocols best meet the needs of all parties involved for situations of this kind.
- A reporter obtained a copy of the police report associated with this incident before the Department should have officially allowed it to be released. Regrettably, leaks concerning salacious or high profile events/crimes are not uncommon within police agencies, but the timing of the press gaining access to this report made a difficult

situation worse. *(It should be noted, however, that this report would have become a public record once the police investigation was closed.)*

- The initial police report indicated that there was “a chorus of ‘I ain’t seen nothin’” from ONS personnel who were present at the scene. While this may have been the gist of what the officers heard from one or more persons, phrasing it in this way was unnecessarily provocative and unprofessional.
- Administrative personnel within the Department, including me, should have done a better job reaching out to Director Boggan earlier during the period following this incident. Deputy Chief Brown left a message with Director Boggan on Friday, but when the two of them were unsuccessful in reaching each other, I should have made follow-up calls to Director Boggan early that following week. I believe if Director Boggan and I had spoken with each other sooner, we could have helped resolve some of the confusion and fallout that stemmed from this incident.
- The process of rotating police personnel through different assignments in the Police Department is both contractually addressed and administratively mandated for a wide range of reasons. Regrettably, two personnel (including one who had been assigned as a liaison to ONS for several years) were both rotated into new assignments at approximately the same time—and shortly before this incident took place. The detective assigned to work with the Ceasefire program had also made a specific request to return to a Patrol assignment, which the Department accommodated. In retrospect, I can appreciate why some of our community partners in the Ceasefire program might be alarmed about the Department’s commitment to this endeavor based on this detective’s reassignment. **For this reason, I will maintain his assignment to the Ceasefire program for one additional year.** I will also take steps to ensure we do a better job communicating with the ONS about RPD personnel transfers that impact that ONS activities.

The relationship between a police department and city entity such as the Office of Neighborhood Safety is a complicated one. Both are focused and heavily committed to reducing crime and violence, yet both need to approach this goal somewhat differently. In many ways, the incident at City Hall highlighted issues we needed to deal with eventually because of the inevitable challenges associated with the populations we serve, the work we do, and the legal constraints we have. I have very strong confidence that moving forward, the Police Department will take all necessary steps to fortify its relationship with ONS, work more effectively with our community partners to implement the Ceasefire project, and address the ONS-RPD protocol concerns that need to be resolved.

Having said all of that, I want to acknowledge once again that real harm has been done, and I believe it is the community that has suffered the most as a result of the miscommunications, poor decision-making, and unnecessary tensions associated with this incident. For this, I am very sorry. It is my job to effectively address interdepartmental issues of this kind before they reflect unfavorably on the City. I sincerely regret that in this case, I failed to meet this expectation. In addition, I believe important relationships based on trust between members of the Ceasefire Working Group and the Police Department have suffered. I am committed to repairing these relationships and helping us achieve our mutual goals. I look forward to meeting with the Working Group to discuss all these and other issues in the near future.

Sincerely yours,

Chris Magnus  
Chief of Police