

Wisconsin Justice Initiative



Ald. Cavalier Johnson, President
Milwaukee Common Council
Room 205
200 E. Wells St.
Milwaukee, WI 53202

June 5, 2020

Dear Council President Johnson,

Thank you for speaking out so eloquently on the slaying of George Floyd and the Milwaukee aftermath. We appreciate your efforts.

Unfortunately, the Common Council and the mayor, by eliminating a program that provided a defense lawyer to indigent Municipal Court defendants, missed an opportunity to protect impoverished people who are victims of police harassment, misconduct, or simple error.

Right now, police are giving people expensive citations for curfew violations, disorderly conduct, and more run-of-the-mill ordinance violations. Those tickets might be expensive annoyances for many people, but they are backbreakers for thousands in our community. This is especially true now, when the coronavirus pandemic has pushed unemployment to extremely high levels.

Last year, the council funded a part-time Legal Action of Wisconsin defense lawyer to represent in Municipal Court people too poor to hire their own attorneys. The cost was \$40,000 for a part-time pilot project (a full-time program would cost about \$100,000, far less than the profit Municipal Court generates for the city). The pilot was successful. It helped the homeless and the mentally ill and the simply poor. We are enclosing a copy of the results report Legal Action filed with the city.

Now, once again, because the city's 2020 budget killed the program, poor people are on their own. They are expected to understand citations, to understand the ordinances they are accused of violating, and to understand the complexities of Municipal Court enough to represent themselves.

Meanwhile, the city goes all in to ensure it gets every dollar from these people it can. It funds police to write tickets. It funds city attorneys to prosecute cases. It funds judges to hear cases. It even funds collection agencies to track down and collect from those with court debt. Milwaukee is truly making money off the backs of its most vulnerable residents.

We have all seen police misbehavior during the George Floyd protests. We all know that law enforcement, during more normal times, is far from equitable in this city.

We ask you to support funding a full-time lawyer to represent indigent defendants in Municipal Court. We also ask that the lawyer be funded *before* the citation cases stemming from the protests start flowing into the court.

We understand that the city is facing hard times and that aldermen and the mayor must make hard choices.

This one doesn't seem so hard, though: Either \$100,000 is too much for the city to spend for a bit of justice for its poorest residents or it isn't.

Sincerely,



Gretchen Schuldt,
Executive Director
Wisconsin Justice Initiative

Cc: All aldermen
Mayor Tom Barrett