

Wisconsin Justice Initiative



P.O. Box 100705
Milwaukee, WI 53210

July 25, 2016

Ald. Michael J. Murphy
Chairman, Common Council Judiciary and Legislation Committee
200 E. Wells Street
Room 205
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear Ald. Murphy,

Wisconsin Justice Initiative Inc. has no position on the merits of holding a referendum to add police officers to the city's payroll. WJI does, however, request that the Common Council reconsider its support of using Municipal Court surcharges to pay for police body cameras (file 150897) before any such referendum is held.

The argument in favor of shifting the costs of the cameras to Municipal Court defendants – many of whom are impoverished -- largely was a financial one. It is beyond ironic that some of those who say the city can afford to add 150 officers to its payroll already have made the case that the city, without further burdening Municipal Court defendants, cannot afford to fully equip its police.

A body camera surcharge, as WJI has argued before, would create a precedent for using surcharges to pay unrelated costs and would fall disproportionately on some of the poorest residents of the city.

We also urge the council, before holding the proposed referendum, to determine whether the city is meeting all of its legal obligations to Municipal Court defendants and whether additional expenditures are necessary to ensure that it is. We remain concerned that Municipal Court may not be holding indigency hearings when appropriate, is not offering enough alternatives to fines to indigent defendants, and is not providing counsel or other procedural safeguards to defendants, particularly when they face potential jail time.

Again, WJI is not taking a position on the merits of the proposed referendum. We do, however, urge the council to examine the issues we've raised before any such referendum is held.

Please make this letter part of file 160444.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Gretchen Schuldt
Executive Director