



CITY OF MILWAUKEE

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Joint Statement on Acceptance of Federal COPS Grant

**From members of the Milwaukee Common Council: Alderwoman Nikiya Dodd,
Alderman Ashanti Hamilton, Alderman Cavalier Johnson and Alderman Mark A.
Borkowski**

Earlier today, a divided Common Council made the difficult decision to accept the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grant from the federal Department of Justice. As was said on the Council floor, the discussion about and around this grant has been lengthy and passionate. Many urgent letters, e-mails, and phone calls on both sides were received and there were protesters in the street and even at the doors of some Council members.

It should never have gone this way.

This grant should never have divided this community as deeply as it did. Public safety is a primary concern for all of us who serve this City and yet, even among ourselves, we disagreed, sometimes vehemently, about taking federal dollars when money from any source is scarce. At times it felt unreal.

The problem is the antiquated structure and requirements of this grant and the uses to which it is put by the Milwaukee Police Department. The Common Council has already made clear to the department that it must reimagine policing to better respond to the present moment. Force must not be its first tool, but its last. And it must embrace methods like trauma-informed care, violence prevention, and other forms of early intervention. More to the point, it must also be willing to change the way it uses scarce federal dollars and no longer assume that the hiring and deployment of sworn officers is the best and only answer when outside resources are received. As the new executive director of the Fire and Police Commission begins his work and as the search for a new chief continues, we are cautiously optimistic that this message has been received.

Which leaves us with the federal government. Never nimble, rarely the best listener, this is nonetheless a time of hope in Washington. Incoming President Joe Biden is filling his administration with officials who understand policing must change for the good of all Americans.

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This is why we support legislation, introduced today, directing the Department of Administration - Intergovernmental Relations Division to lobby for changes to the COPS grant. Instead of preventing the reimagining of policing mentioned above, it should embrace and encourage it. This Common Council should never again be told that the novel ideas brought to the department by council members and the community cannot be funded. Put simply, the Department of Justice must find a way to say “yes” to the community involvement and local oversight that is the only real path forward.

Related to this, the legislation also asks that the federal government grant local authorities greater review of the uses to which this grant is put by police departments prior to its acceptance by the department. We entrust police officers with a great deal. They, in turn, must collaborate with elected officials and the public.

We have never been afraid of difficult decisions. They come with the job. Real leadership, however, is preventing unnecessary conflict before it occurs. It is our sincere hope that the next time this City discusses the COPS grant, it is in a spirit of optimism that resources are being used in ways that benefit all of us.