



August 24, 2014

Honorable Harold Perrin
City of Jonesboro
300 S. Church St.
Jonesboro, AR 72401

RE: Police Chief Mike Yates

Dear Mayor Perrin:

As representatives of the Society of Professional Journalists, the nation's oldest and largest journalism organization, we are glad to see that you have taken concerns about Chief Mike Yates' public behavior seriously enough to suspend him for 30 days without pay.

We also are impressed that you require Mr. Yates to write a public apology to The Jonesboro Sun and its former reporter, Sunshine Crump.

We sympathize with the difficulty you've faced in the days since this confrontation between your top law enforcement officer and your city's daily newspaper became a topic of national interest. But we must emphasize that it's clear to us that your police chief recklessly and publicly attacked the credibility and character of a reporter and threatened the economic wellbeing of a newspaper company.

Now that we've seen his Aug. 13 letter to the newspaper's publisher expressing his concerns about the reporter's accuracy, we understand Chief Yates' frustration, but cannot condone how he expressed it on social media.

A police chief should protect and serve the community, not intimidate and discredit its members.

Mr. Yates asserts he was exercising his First Amendment right of free expression, but the First Amendment exists to protect citizens from their government. As a police chief, Mr. Yates is a principal avatar of the government, and thus his free speech rights must be balanced with his public responsibilities.

Even so, the public comments he made about Ms. Crump are potentially libelous in our view and exposed your city to litigation and possible financial penalties.

In a time when police departments across the country operate under heightened public scrutiny, your police chief's behavior only adds fuel to the outrage many feel about police policies and practices.

We hope Chief Yates takes your public rebuke to heart, apologizes for his behavior and resolves to stop using his authority to bully others, including journalists.

We also hope that the police department resumes operating in the spirit of openness required by the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act.

We represent hundreds of professional and student journalists in Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana who belong to SPJ. This organization has more than 7,500 members across the country.

We plan to share this letter with our members in this region and with fellow members of SPJ's national board who represent other regions to raise awareness and to support the Sun in its effort to stand up to Mr. Yates.

We will continue to monitor the situation in Jonesboro.

Sincerely,

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