

COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENTS

MEMBER

- Community & Economic Development Committee
- Public Works Committee



RUSSELL W. STAMPER, II
ALDERMAN, 15TH DISTRICT

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Actions must speak louder than words

Statement from Alderman Russell W. Stamper, II September 16, 2020

Yesterday the Chief of the Milwaukee Fire Department (Chief Rohlfing) was called to address a communication file sponsored by Alderwoman Milele A. Cogg and myself. This file dealt with an incident that occurred in a fire station earlier this year, where a Black female baby doll was hung by a ribbon in the firehouse and was allowed to be there for four days before it was eventually taken down. The only African-American female firefighter, in this particular fire station, reported this incident and an investigation ensued. During yesterday's communication file hearing held by the Public Safety and Health Committee, Chief Rohlfing testified to the chronological dating of the internal investigation conducted by an all-white investigative committee.

This investigation, to which the Chief supports, deemed that this act was not racist or sexist. I, along with the Brotherhood of Black Firefighters, vehemently disagree with this determination. How is it possible that the leader of a fire department composed of African-American firefighters be so out of touch with our current state of society that he would think this despicable act was done absent of ill intent? I guess this disconnection would be in keeping with the fact that the department is roughly 90 percent white in a minority-majority city. Also, this disconnect would be consistent with the fact that only 4 out of 23 command staff for this Chief are minority.

Chief Rohlfing yesterday characterized this incident as the unfortunate naivety of a ten-year veteran of the department. I again disagree, the naivety would be ours to own if we believe this to be true. It is 2020 and if you believe hanging a Black baby doll at any point for any reason is okay, then you have been sleeping for the past 60 years. You have undoubtedly slept through the feminist movement, you have slept soundly through the civil rights movement, you have somehow, amongst the chants of protesters and marchers, been able to sleep through the Black Lives Matter movement we are currently in, only to awaken and tell us this Black baby doll being hung on public property by a public employee is just "boys being boys."

This incident will now be heard by the Fire and Police Commission. We implore the Fire and Police Commission to terminate the firefighter that thought it acceptable to hang a Black baby doll on property that we all, Black and White, pay taxes to support. We implore the Fire and Police Commission, despite the opposition of this out of touch Chief, to develop a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to racist and sexist acts.

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This brazen act of disrespect displayed by the noosing in effigy of a Black baby doll cannot and should not be tolerated; not in the past, not in the present, and not in the future. How can you expect those African-American firefighters, who put their lives on the line daily for our city and its citizens, to feel appreciated when it appears blatant racism is tolerated and swept under the rug by the fire department and those at the helm of the department? A message must be sent that these types of acts do not and will not represent our city. If the present Chief of the department is not willing to take the proper actions in enforcing this message, I ask that he step down and allow a true leader willing to protect our fire department to step up, as what has occurred until this point has not been leadership but rather protection of the “old boys” network. A protection of those our city can no longer afford to protect. A protection of the status quo and systemic racism we are all fighting to eradicate. I repeat, if the present Chief is not ready to do this work, which he has already proven he isn't, he must step down and be replaced by someone who is.

We must protect all of our citizens. As the entity charged with doing this, the City of Milwaukee cannot condone racist and sexist behavior. We must lead the way and show that this issue is serious and all acts like this will be met with swift and decisive action, or we can choose to bury our heads in the sand and remain asleep as it appears our Chief has been for 60 years.

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