



HOUSTON PROFESSIONAL FIRE FIGHTERS ASSOCIATION LOCAL 341 EST. 1932

July 23, 2009

Ms. Jolanda "Jo" Jones
Houston City Council
City Hall Annex
900 Bagby, 1st Floor
Houston, Texas 77002

VIA E-MAIL

Dear Council Member Jones,

George Fress and I welcomed the opportunity to meet with you and Keith Wade on July 14 to discuss recent developments within the Houston Fire Department and to update you on the ongoing efforts of the Houston Professional Fire Fighters Association to assist our affected members. Your commendable work in support of Houston firefighters – such as your help in the facilitation of repairs at HFD Stations 46 and 25 – led George and I to expect a frank and productive discussion.

What evolved at the meeting shocked and disappointed us. Our attempts to answer your questions and update you were repeatedly interrupted and shouted down when our knowledge of the situation contradicted your inaccurate conclusions. Worse yet were your threats, attempts to intimidate, profane outbursts, and racist ranting. I suggest that you offer apologies first to the restaurant owner who had to threaten to call the police unless you controlled yourself and then to the families in the restaurant whose children witnessed your outrageous behavior.

As for your dubious insistence that the HPFFA "should have been there" for the victimized firefighters at Station 54, we have assisted firefighter Jane Draycott on several previous occasions, contrary to your public statements. After Jane's anonymous call to our office alluding to "what's going on at Station 54," we used Caller ID to identify and follow up with her. An HPFFA board member, who had assisted her in the past, asked why she was making an anonymous call when we had successfully represented her in the past. I believe she then retained a private lawyer who is now providing her with representation.

At my request, HPFFA general counsel Rick Mumey subsequently spoke with her lawyer, and assured him that if the allegations prove to be true, we would support the enforcement of appropriate disciplinary action. We agreed to intervene with the city to have Ms. Draycott's leave paid by the city while the investigation was ongoing. We further agreed that the HFD workplace must be fair and free from discrimination and harassment. My public statements on July 7 and 8 and comments to news media outlets reiterated this commitment.

You can continue to doubt us, but I remind you that the HPFFA – not your office, not you personally, and not the city – helped Jane when her daughter tragically died a few years ago. In a gesture of support that far exceeded our organizational obligations to her, brother and sister union firefighters paid for the remains of Jane’s daughter to be returned home. The confidentiality requirements of the grievance process limit what I can disclose in this correspondence, but it is sufficient to say that Local 341 has assisted her on other occasions regarding her employment relationship with HFD.

As for the ongoing investigation of HFD, I prefer to wait to pass judgment until the Office of the Inspector General or other agencies release findings. When the truth finally emerges about what happened at Station 54 and provides a more accurate view of HFD, I hope that you also will apologize to Chief Boriskie and the thousands of honorable firefighters who you have disparaged in recent weeks.

While we await the completion of the investigation(s), I urge you to review the history of HFD, starting with the mid-1950s when Houston became one of the nation’s first cities to integrate its fire department. Then compare our departmental successes and failures to other fire departments and institutions around the nation. Any earnest look at HPFFA’s efforts, along with those of the International Association of Fire Fighters and city management, will reflect measurable progress in workplace and labor conditions in HFD. While that is the consensus of our members of all races and while our racial demographics generally reflect those of Houston, we believe that more must be done with HFD recruitment of female firefighters. The HPFFA has repeatedly expressed this concern and offered possible solutions to city officials.

On a personal note, as the first black president of the HPFFA, I am acutely aware of HFD’s race and gender history and its culture, for better or worse. With that in mind, I was astounded and disgusted by your description of me at the restaurant meeting as a “house Negro” interested only in keeping a job. You imply that I am not really “black” because I do not share your biased point of view. I do not know where to begin in responding, except to say that you and the race-baiting opportunists criticizing HFD deserve one another. I am indeed interested in keeping my job, and the choice between standing with the men and women of the HPFFA or standing with you is not a difficult one. Your insults are unwarranted, ignorant and damaging. Ironically, if we were to apply your newly proclaimed “zero-tolerance” discrimination workplace standard, your conduct at the restaurant would be a terminating offense. City voters eventually might see the situation that way as well.

Despite my skepticism about your motives, the HPFFA remains available to resume the discussion with you and any city officials committed to investigating and honestly addressing the challenges facing HFD.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeffrey Caynon', with a stylized, sweeping flourish at the end.

Jeffrey Caynon
President