



**Request for City Council Committee Action
From the City Attorney's Office**

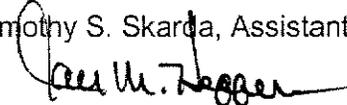
Date: September 10, 2004
To: Ways & Means/Budget Committee
Referral to: None

Subject: Request for Reimbursement of Legal Fees for Officers John Hokanson and Michael Morales.

Recommendation: That the City Council approve the requests of Officers John Hokanson and Michael Morales for the reimbursement of attorneys' fees and costs payable to Rice, Michels & Walther, L.L.P. in the amount of \$754.50 for representation of the officers payable from Fund/Org. 6900 150 1500 4000.

Previous Directives: None.

Prepared by: Timothy S. Skarda, Assistant City Attorney, 673-2553

Approved by: 

Jay M. Heffern
City Attorney

Presenter in Committee: Jay M. Heffern, City Attorney

Financial Impact (Check those that apply)

- No financial impact - or - Action is within current department budget.
(If checked, go directly to Background/Supporting Information)
- Action requires an appropriation increase to the Capital Budget
- Action requires an appropriation increase to the Operating Budget
- Action provides increased revenue for appropriation increase
- Action requires use of contingency or reserves
- Other financial impact (Explain): Payment from Fund/Org. 6900 150 1500 4000
- Request provided to the Budget Office when provided to the Committee Coordinator

Community Impact: None

Background/Supporting Information

Officers John Hokanson and Michael Morales have requested, through their attorney, the reimbursement of legal fees pursuant to Minnesota Statute §465.76. The fees arose from representation during an investigation of a critical incident that occurred on August 7, 2003. Officers John Hokanson and Michael Morales were dispatched to a call of a threatening man at the Super America station located on West Grant Street near Loring Park. The man was subdued and, because of his behavior, taken to the Crisis Center at the Hennepin County Medical Center. Shortly after being released to medical staff the man died. The matter was investigated by the Hennepin County Sheriff's Department. The investigation resulted in no criminal

charges being filed. Ann E. Walther of Rice, Michels & Walther, L.L.P. represented of the officers throughout the process.

Ms. Walther submitted itemized bills to this office for payment under Minn. Stat. § 465.76. Ms. Walther expended 6.00 hours on legal representation at an hourly rate of \$125.00 and incurred \$4.50 in expenses. The hours expended were related to the criminal defense of the officers. The hours expended appear reasonable.

Minnesota Statute §465.76 provides:

"If reimbursement is requested by the officer or employee, the governing body of a home rule charter or statutory city or county may, after consultation with its legal counsel, reimburse a city or county officer or employee for any costs and reasonable attorneys fees incurred by the person to defend charges of a criminal nature brought against the person that arose out of the reasonable and lawful performance of duties for the city or county, provided if less than quorum of the governing body is disinterested, that such reimbursement shall be approved by a judge of the district court."

In 1984 the City Council appointed a criminal legal fees task force. The task force was directed to consider and recommend appropriate policies for the City to follow with respect to payment of legal fees. The task force examined the statutes, policies of other jurisdictions, the present policy, case law and alternative procedures. In a letter dated June 18, 1984, the task force ratified the existing system in which the City Council, after the advice of the City Attorney upon the reasonableness of the fees and the scope of employment issues, acts formally on a request for reimbursement. Prior to acting, the Council reviews each case with reference to the general principles as follows:

1. Nature of the inquiry or allegations by the investigating authority.
2. Whether the action arose out of the performance of the officer or employee's duties.
3. Whether he or she acted in good faith.
4. Whether there was malfeasance or willful or wanton neglect of duty.
5. Whether he or she was acting pursuant to directions from a superior or pursuant to law.
6. Whether the morale of other City officers and employees would be adversely affected by paying or not paying the claim.

The above criteria were developed under Minn. Sess. Laws 1969, Chapter 790, Section 2, granting the City of Minneapolis authority to reimburse legal fees to employees in criminal proceedings. Minn. Stat. §465.76 was later enacted. The new section is fundamentally the same, except insofar as it adds the requirement that the incident arise from the "lawful" performance of the duties of the employee. It had been the practice under Chapter 790 to approve reimbursement only upon acquittal or failure to charge the employee. Minn. Stat. §465.76 makes this practice mandatory.

With regard to the first consideration set forth in the letter of the task force, the review of the conduct of the officer falls within the statute's parameters. The attorney's fees requested arise from a criminal investigation by the Office of the Hennepin County Sheriff.

The second criterion is also satisfied. The allegations related to law enforcement activities performed while on duty.

Regarding the third consideration, the officers acted in good faith. The investigation determined that the actions were not illegal or improper. The officers were responding to an emergency call and attempting to control an uncooperative suspect.

Regarding the fourth consideration, we conclude, based upon the investigation and decision that no crime had been committed, that there was no malfeasance or willful or wanton neglect of duty.

As to consideration number five, the officers were acting pursuant to law and exercising their duties as police officers. The actions of the officers were authorized by law and within their legal authority.

Finally, with regard to consideration number six, the denial of the request for attorney fees would have a negative impact on the morale of other City employees. Police officers who were making a good faith effort to enforce the law would be responsible for the payment of attorney's fees arising from mandatory investigations into their conduct.

Based on the foregoing it is our recommendation that Officers John Hokanson and Michael Morales be reimbursed for criminal defense fees pursuant to Minn. Stat. §465.76.