



Request for City Council Committee Action

Date: March 8, 2002
To: Ways & Means/Budget Committee
Referral to: None

Subject: Request for Reimbursement of Legal Fees for Officers Brandy Steberg and Jason King.

Recommendation: That the City Council approve the request of Officers Brandy Steberg and Jason King for the reimbursement of attorneys' fees to Frederic Bruno & Associates in the amount of \$5,180.14 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:

City Goals: Build Community

Background/Supporting Information Attached

Minneapolis Police Officers Brandy Steberg and Jason King have requested, through their attorney, the reimbursement of legal fees pursuant to Minnesota Statutes §465.76. The fees arose from their representation during an investigation by the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office and before a Hennepin County

Grand Jury of an incident in which Demitreus Sesler was fatally injured. The Hennepin County Grand Jury concluded that no criminal charges were appropriate. Frederic Bruno and Associates represented the officers.

The investigation involved an incident that arose on April 2, 2001. Officers were following up on a call concerning a burglary when they heard shots being fired. A jeep sped by the officers and they pursued the vehicle. The officers observed the passenger in the jeep hold up a shotgun and rack a round into the chamber. The passenger appeared to be attempting to get a shot at the pursuing squad car. In an alley from 46th Street between Nicollet and Blaisdell the passenger, Demitreus Sesler, got out of the vehicle. Sesler was armed with a shotgun with a pistol grip. Sesler did not drop the shotgun when ordered, but pointed it at Officer Steberg who fired. Sesler was struck. He did not drop the weapon, but fled on foot. When Officer Steberg caught up to Sesler, he again refused to drop the weapon, bringing it to bear on Officer Steberg who fired. Sesler died at the scene. Spent shotgun rounds were discovered in the rear of the Sesler vehicle. Sesler had apparently fired into a barbershop earlier in the evening, the owner of which he had accused of having an affair with his fiancée. The Hennepin County Sheriff's Department investigated the death. The matter was considered by a grand jury that declined to issue criminal charges.

Frederic Bruno submitted itemized bills to this office for payment under Minn. Stat. §465.76. The total amount of the itemized bill is \$5,180.14. The hours expended were related to the criminal defense of the officers. The bill appears reasonable, especially considering the length of the investigation and multiple grand jury sessions.

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 officers falls within the statute's parameters. The attorney's fees requested arise from a criminal investigation by the Hennepin County Sheriff's Department and subsequent consideration by a grand jury.

The second criterion is also satisfied. The officers were on duty and investigating criminal activity. They were acting for a public purpose and under color of law.

Regarding the third consideration, the officers acted in good faith. The grand jury declined to issue criminal charges, essentially agreeing that the use of deadly force was appropriate under the circumstances faced by the officers.

Regarding the fourth consideration, we conclude that there was no malfeasance or willful or wanton neglect of duty. The officers were acting pursuant to law and the policies and procedures of the Minneapolis Police Department.

As to consideration number five, the officers were acting pursuant to law and exercising their legal duties as police officers.

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 of their conduct.

Based on the foregoing it is our recommendation that Officers Brandy Steberg and Jason King be reimbursement for criminal defense fees pursuant to Minn. Stat. §465.76.