

May 6, 2016

Multnomah Charter Review Committee
Subcommittee on Appointment of Sheriff
Via Email Transmission

To Whom It May Concern:

Partnership for Safety and Justice urges the Multnomah County Charter Review Committee to refer a proposal to the voters making the office of Multnomah County Sheriff an appointed position. Additionally, we ask that you propose an additional amendment to the charter making the Multnomah County Commission responsible for appointing an interim Sheriff in the event that a Sheriff steps down from office or is recalled prior to finishing his or her term. This would end strange and potentially harmful practice of allowing outgoing Sheriffs to appoint their own successor.

As recent news reports indicate, the Multnomah County Sheriff wields significant power within an important segment of our public safety system – often with little or no oversight. As the Department’s own September 2015 *Corrections Use of Force Audit* report found and subsequent actions by the Sheriff demonstrate, this power can be used in harmful and disproportionate ways. One of the findings from that report was: “Within the jails, black inmates account for only 27% of the jail population, yet are involved in 40% of the use of force.” With the heightened awareness of racial and ethnic biases within our criminal justice system, we must ensure that our highest law enforcement officials are held to the strictest standards and accountability.

The Multnomah County Sheriff plays a critical role in public safety at both the local and statewide levels. As Sheriff of the largest and best resourced county in the state, the office should be a model for Oregon. Instead, the county’s last two Sheriffs have been forced to leave office before the end of their terms due to scandal or inability to perform essential duties. The Charter Review Committee will remember that former Sheriff Bernie Guisto left office after a number of scandals, both personal and professional; his replacement Sheriff Bob Skipper was no longer able to pass the required tests to hold this position. This scenario appears to be happening a third time. Currently, Sheriff Staton is embroiled in controversies that make clear his inability to effectively lead the Sheriff’s Office.

This history of problems with elected Sheriffs indicates that a reconsideration of how these officials are chosen is long overdue. We believe that transitioning to an appointment process that includes a rigorous vetting and interview process, rather than a purely political electoral process, is a necessary step forward. An appointment process for choosing the Multnomah Sheriff by the County Commission would ensure a more effective

review of applicant qualifications and on-the-job assessment of his or her management and spending practices – all of which are unchecked under the current system.

Possibly the most disturbing aspect of current rules is that outgoing Sheriffs, even those forced to resign for failure in office, are empowered to appoint their own successor. That makes no sense, whether under an electoral process or an appointment process. Clearly, responsibility for appointment of an interim or permanent replacement for a Sheriff who leaves office before the end of his or her term should be left to officials who remain in good standing with voters. In the case of county District Attorneys, appointments are made by the Governor. We think it would be completely appropriate for Sheriffs to be appointed by the County Commission. But, either option would be a far better process than continuing to allow out-going Sheriffs to choose their own successors when they are forced or choose to resign.

Partnership for Safety and Justice encourages the Review Committee to refer these questions to Multnomah County voters. Multnomah County's Sheriffs should be appointed through a competitive application process approved by the County Commission and the County Commission should have sole authority to appoint an interim acting Sheriff when the position has become vacant.

Sheriffs play a critically important role in ensuring safety and justice for all Multnomah County residents. In following a political selection process – in which voters are asked to choose a Sheriff based on little or no information about the candidate(s) – the system of electing candidates to this complex and highly technical position has consistently failed. The residents of Multnomah County deserve better. We urge the Charter Review Committee to take action by providing Multnomah County voters with an opportunity to make this needed change themselves.

Sincerely,



Andrew W. Ko
Executive Director