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Police Unions' Statement Regarding Recent Enforcement Action at the Capitol

The Madison Professional Police Officers Association and Dane County Deputy Sheriffs Association today release the following joint statement:

In February of 2011, tens of thousands of Wisconsinites travelled to our state Capitol in order to have their voices heard. It was truly a remarkable time in Wisconsin's history, where people from all sides of a political issue came together in one place to peacefully demonstrate. There was an exceptional relationship between the protesters and on-duty law enforcement officers during this time, and Madison saw none of the strife or violence that has touched other protest movements nationwide.

The on-duty officers acted in a truly exemplary manner during the 2011 protests. They were professional and courteous, and performed their duties impartially in order to protect the free speech rights of all parties involved. These officers, from countless jurisdictions across Wisconsin, set an example for the world to follow regarding the role of the police during peaceful citizen protests. Part of the reason they were able to accomplish this was that the leaders of these agencies were extremely sensitive to the free speech rights of all participants, and as such, did not place their officers in positions that would infringe upon those rights.

It is within this context that we have been watching with alarm the recent developments at the Wisconsin State Capitol. In recent weeks, the Department of Administration (DOA) and the leadership within the Capitol Police have commenced enforcement action against peaceful protesters coming to the Capitol. Officers have been ordered to arrest and cite protesters whose only offense is the silent carrying of a sign. Other protesters have been cited for gathering for the "Solidarity Sing-along," a non-violent group of citizens who sing every day over the noon hour. The Solidarity Singers have been particularly cognizant of the needs of other groups who also want to utilize the Capitol, and frequently relocate outside the Capitol to be respectful of those needs. They are now being cited for assembly at the Capitol without a permit.

The right to free speech and the right to peaceful assembly are two of the fundamental rights upon which our democracy is based. Since the birth of our nation, the courts have taken great pains to protect these rights vigorously, and view any infringement upon these rights with great skepticism. We believe the recent enforcement action at the Capitol clearly violates these rights in a way that should be unacceptable in a free society.



To be perfectly clear, our grievance is not with the officers of the Capitol Police. These officers have performed admirably for over a year and a half under very trying circumstances. We believe that the recent policy change at the Capitol presents a substantial safety risk to the officers who are tasked with its implementation. Simply stated, these officers are being forced into emotionally-charged confrontations that are neither necessary nor advisable.

The Capitol Police officers are also the only participants in this situation who stand to lose their livelihood and ability to support their families. These officers are particularly vulnerable due to the fact that they lost their collective bargaining rights with countless other public employees under Act 10. This statement is as much a statement in support of these officers as it is a statement condemning the policies of the DOA and the leadership of the Capitol Police. These officers are being placed in an impossible position.

We are asking the Department of Administration, the leadership of the Capitol Police, and the Governor's Office to respect the core values and freedoms upon which this great state and nation were founded, and cease their infringement upon these freedoms. Wisconsin has a rich tradition of open government and free expression of ideas, and we ask that these individuals uphold this tradition in a manner worthy of their positions of public trust. If the current trajectory of these policies continues, we do not believe that history will judge the leaders of this state kindly with respect to the free speech rights of its citizens.