



# ETHICS COMMISSION CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

August 4, 2014

The Honorable Presiding Judge John K. Stewart  
400 McAllister Street, Room 008  
San Francisco, CA 94102-4512

Re: Civil Grand Jury Report: San Francisco's Whistleblower Protection Ordinance is in  
Need of Change

Dear Judge Stewart:

The 2015 Civil Grand Jury produced a report regarding the Whistleblower Ordinance  
requiring responses from the Ethics Commission and the Director. My responses must  
concur with those of my Commissioners. They are attached.

Sincerely,

John St. Croix  
Executive Director

Cc: Board of Supervisors

### Finding 1:

The WPO does not fully "protect" City officers and employees from retaliation for filing a complaint as required by the Charter mandate of Proposition C, because it covers only a limited range of complaints, it provides no effective remedy for the victim, and its secrecy provisions limit its deterrent effect.

*Finding 1. Partially agree. The WPO does have some limitations that can be improved. However, the confidentiality provisions for investigations are important as they protect both the complainant and the respondent during the period when accusations are proved or disproved. There is a difference between "confidentiality" and "secrecy."*

### Recommendation 1.1:

That the Ethics Commission recommend to the Board of Supervisors an amendment to the WPO that provides real protection for whistleblowers, in conformity with the Charter mandate of Proposition C.

*Recommendation 1.1. May be implemented. The Ethics Commission is willing to suggest amendments to the WPO to the Board of Supervisors but will need the assistance of the City Attorney's Office, the Department of Human Resources and the Controller's Office. Also, due to an already heavy planned workload for this year, and in addition the upcoming election cycle, the Commission anticipates that it will not be able to begin this project until 2016. Further, should the Board of Supervisors communicate in writing to the Commission that they wish to conduct the drafting of these amendments, the Commission will defer to the Board.*

### Recommendation 1.3:

If the Ethics Commission requests that the Board amend the WPO and the Board fails to act, that the Commission consider submitting such an amendment directly to the voters.

*Recommendation 1.3. May be implemented. If the Commission recommends amendment(s) to the Board that are not considered or not adopted, the Commission will then consider sending the amendment(s) to the voters.*

### Finding 2:

The WPO also fails to fulfill the Charter mandate, in that it does not cover all whistleblower disclosures specified in the Charter.

*Finding 2. Partially agree. The WPO may not reach all aspects of complaints provided in the Charter. However, defining "providing information" in terms of oral complaints may provide difficulties in that the record of the complaint is not memorialized as the person making the complaint and the person receiving the complaint could easily have different versions of the conversation.*

### Recommendation 2.1:

That amendments to the WPO expand the definition of whistleblowing to cover oral complaints to the complainant's department; disclosures to a City department or commission other than the complainant's own; and providing information to any of the recipients listed in the Charter mandate (hereafter "listed recipients"), outside of the formal complaint or investigation process.

Recommendation: 2.2:

That these amendments further expand the scope of covered disclosures to include "providing information" to any of the listed recipients regarding improper government activities, whether or not such information is set forth in a formal complaint, or provided during an official investigation.

*Recommendations 2.1 and 2.2. May be implemented. If and when the Commission considers amending the WPO, it will take these recommendations into consideration. It may be advisable to expand the scope of the definition of "providing information" but there needs to be provision for the memorializing of these reports.*

Finding 3.1:

While other large California cities and counties have relatively weak laws protecting their employees from retaliation for whistleblowing, this does not relieve the Board of its responsibility under the Charter mandate, to enact an ordinance that genuinely protects whistleblowers.

Finding 3.2:

Whistleblower protection laws that cover government employees at the state and Federal level can serve as a useful model for improving the WPO.

*Finding 3.1 and 3.2. No disagreement.*

Recommendation 3:

That amendments to the WPO provide a meaningful remedy for the effects of retaliation, by authorizing the Ethics Commission to order cancellation of a retaliatory job action, and increasing the limit of the civil penalty available under the WPO to an amount adequate to repay the financial losses that can result from such an action.

*Recommendation 3. May be implemented. The Commission believes these recommendations may well improve the WPO and will also take them into consideration. The Commission notes that Employment Law is not part of our mandate and is normally handled by other departments. Many factors may come into consideration in this area such as MOU's and other labor agreements that are not properly part of the Ethics Commission mission. The Commission also notes that these proposals may create a large increase in staff workload.*

Finding 4:

The WPO creates an unwarranted obstacle to administrative complaints of retaliation filed with the Ethics Commission, by imposing a burden of proof on the complainant during preliminary review and investigation of such complaints.

*Finding 4. Partially agree. The Commission was not party to the creation of the WPO, and so is not aware of the intended scope by the creators of the ordinance.*

Recommendation 4:

That amendments to the WPO include a revision of Subsection 4.115(b)(iii) providing that the burden of proof set forth therein does not apply during preliminary review and investigation of administrative complaints to the Commission.

*Recommendation 4. May be implemented. As stated above, the Commission will carefully consider these recommendations when considering amending the ordinance. The Commission believes that there needs to be some demonstrable basis for a complaint in order to justify an investigation.*