

Debra Thompson

From: Debra Thompson
Sent: Monday, January 23, 2023 10:13 AM
To: Assembly
Cc: Stephen Giesbrecht
Subject: Thin Blue Line Wall Art Conversation
Attachments: Thin Blue Line Flag Art in PD Conversation.PDF

Dear Assembly,

I am forwarding you a conversation between Sarah Fine-Walsh and Manager Giesbrecht regarding the wall art located in the Patrol Room of the Police Department that contains the Thin Blue Line. Please read the attached email chain from the bottom up to get it all in the order it occurred. Please let Steve or I know if you have any questions.

Thank you,
Debbie

Debra K. Thompson, CMC
Borough Clerk/Human Resources Director

Petersburg Borough
907-772-5405



Debra Thompson

From: Stephen Giesbrecht
Sent: Thursday, January 12, 2023 2:51 PM
To: sarah@finewalshlaw.com
Cc: Debra Thompson
Subject: RE: Flag Concern - response

Sarah, thank you for your email. I will share this with the Assembly.

From: Sarah Fine <sarah@finewalshlaw.com>
Sent: Thursday, January 12, 2023 2:24 PM
To: Stephen Giesbrecht <sgiesbrecht@petersburgak.gov>
Cc: Debra Thompson <dthompson@petersburgak.gov>
Subject: Re: Flag Concern - response

In the course of my duties as an attorney I have seen this other multi-color thin blue line flag you speak of in the lobby of the police station. While you will notice I made a complaint about the official Thin Blue Line Flag specifically, and not this sanitized version in the lobby, in my opinion both are dangerous and divisive and not suitable for display in Borough buildings. I immediately recognized the hateful symbol which is implied in this sanitized version, and was immediately disturbed by it for the very reasons you describe for not wanting to take down the Thin Blue Line Flag--this emergency responders version obscures and normalizes a noted white nationalist symbol as mere, vague, general solidarity with emergency responders and law enforcement. But consider: solidarity with law enforcement...against what? Against what issues, in what fight? Against any attempt whatsoever to hold law enforcement accountable for anything, no matter how heinous? Total suppression of criticism against the only people in town with a license to kill?

The fact is, Thin Blue Line symbol is both divisive and political because by its very nature it suppresses residents' First Amendment protected liberties of free speech, and is therefore unsuitable for display in Borough buildings.

Further, Kerr's promise that the official Thin Blue Line Flag he's put on display here has a special non-racist meaning in Alaska strains credulity to the breaking point. Mr. Manager, you and I have spoken at length about how police in America have a national culture of policing due to the requirement that our police officers be trained at nationally-accredited police academies. The obvious truth is it is national not State police culture at play here in the Petersburg Police Department. This truth is again obvious by the particular Thin Blue Line flag on display, because it's not the State of Alaska flag, it's the national American flag. It clearly references to a national culture, specifically white nationalism, which considered to be [the most significant domestic terrorism threat facing the United States today](#).

I will also note from a litigation standpoint it is not a good sign that I first noticed the official Thin Blue Flag in our police station--the full black-and-white-and-blue American flag symbol--shortly after Plaintiff Kerr filed his unfounded lawsuit against the Borough alleging defamation. The Borough would do well to consider the planting of this flag as an escalation, a use of rhetorical force. Plaintiff Kerr's actions of suing the Borough and then flying this particular flag does not demand from Petersburg mere solidarity with police in a vague sense. It demands solidarity with Kerr in a specific sense: against any attempts to him personally accountable for anything at all, whether it's for hiring a Nazi, or making an improper anti-mask political statement while on duty, or making an Alaska history-making HR complaint against sitting assembly members properly using their investigatory powers against the police...anything at all.

The simplest, most obvious explanation here is the right one--this flag means the same thing in Petersburg as it does everywhere else in America. It is a threatening statement against perceived enemies of the police, and is a big red flag for the culture in Petersburg. I insist on challenging this now because the longer this flag stays up in our police station, the more likely violence against Petersburg residents becomes. I refuse to wait until the police physically harm someone

in our town to speak out about what a bad sign it is that this white nationalist symbol is now on public display in our police station.

While it may be true that "many" police departments in Alaska choose to use this divisive national symbol in their precincts, I'm sure there are still plenty more who do not do so. Just because many towns in Alaska have threatening nationalist flags in their police stations doesn't mean that Petersburg has to be one of them.

According to a friend of mine in Ketchikan (whose town is apparently is unafraid to indict their sitting police chief for felony assault ([have you read this story??](#))), their town does not have this Thin Blue Line symbol displayed anywhere, let alone in their police station. Maybe we can be more like Ketchikan in that way.

To get a more accurate picture of how Alaska really treats this issue I am now frankly tempted to start calling up police stations across the state myself and doing an informal phone poll of who actually chooses to display this symbol in their precinct and who does not. If Borough Administration chose to ask around Alaska about this fact issue more privately, before continuing to trust Plaintiff Kerr's questionable assessment of this issue, I would certainly appreciate it.

SFW

On Wed, Jan 11, 2023 at 3:56 PM Stephen Giesbrecht <sgiesbrecht@petersburgak.gov> wrote:

Sarah -

Unfortunately, the PPD Procedures Manual, Rule 125, does not contain a definitive indication as to what was intended by "political issues", as that term is used in paragraph 1(a), although the further examples set out in the more specific paragraphs 1(b) through 1(h) give some guidance. As you probably know, that manual was created by a former chief and I was not involved in its development. Read broadly, the language of 1(a) could conceivably encompass even the American flag, and in my mind that was probably not what was intended. Read less broadly, it could be limited to controversies, political in nature, which could be viewed as impacting or calling into question the neutrality of the department or individual officers - like the examples set out in 1(b)-(h).

At this point, given the lack of any indication that the flag symbol is being used in the borough or in the state to advocate for or to influence any specific "political cause" such as white nationalism, and the fact that it is in widespread use throughout Alaska law enforcement departments, I didn't view it as coming under the definition of 'political activity'. It also doesn't seem to be included in any of the more specific examples provided in paragraphs 1(b)-(h). In short, I currently view this flag art as a generic statement of support for the efforts of community police officers, similar to another flag that has been hanging in the PD since the new building opened - I've attached a picture of that flag here. That flag contains a partial American flag, setting out the different lines used for different public employees, and expresses general support for officers, firefighters, EMS workers, and other public servants. I didn't view that as political activity or a political issue either.

I hope this provides further insight into my thinking on this. I would add that my view may change over time, if I learn new information or if there are future developments.

Steve

From: Sarah Fine <sarah@finewalshlaw.com>
Sent: Wednesday, January 11, 2023 11:04 AM
To: Stephen Giesbrecht <sgiesbrecht@petersburgak.gov>
Cc: Debra Thompson <dthompson@petersburgak.gov>
Subject: Re: Flag Concern - response

It is not acceptable to me that this response fails to include Petersburg Police Rule 125 in this analysis. The fact that it's apparently state standard to use a symbol like this is alarming to say the least. But it still does not change our local Petersburg rule of no political statements on duty.

The whole point of posting this flag is for political purposes. If it was not a political statement it would just be a miscolored American flag.

I respectfully request a complete analysis and response.

SFW

On Wed, Jan 11, 2023 at 10:06 AM Stephen Giesbrecht <sgiesbrecht@petersburgak.gov> wrote:

Sarah,

I appreciate you bringing the matter of the usage of the thin blue line flag at the Petersburg PD to my attention. I've now had the opportunity to look into this a little further.

Your complaint (verbal) was that this symbol is "being used by white supremacy groups and racist organizations and should not be displayed in the Police Station" (paraphrased). After checking with both Chief Kerr and a law

enforcement consultant utilized by the Borough's insurer, I've learned that many police departments in Alaska, including the State Troopers, currently use this flag to show support for law enforcement. Some departments have flags hanging in their stations, some use medals with the symbol for their uniforms, it is used on challenge coins, and at least one has incorporated the design into the painting of their building. I have not found anything to suggest that the symbol is tied to any racist groups in Alaska or our Borough. The use of this flag here in Petersburg appears to be consistent with its original purpose of showing support for Police Officers and the job they do.

At this point, I feel the use of this flag and symbol is consistent with the mission of supporting our communities and our Police Officers. I recognize that the meaning of symbols like this can change over time, and if I learn anything that suggests that it is being used here for a different, offensive purpose, I would certainly review this matter again.

Thank you and please let me know if you have any further questions or concerns.

Steve

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