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Via Electronic Mail

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An Open Letter on Work Conditions in the City of Harlingen's Sanitation Department

Dear Mr. Dávila, Ms. García, Mr. Torres, and Mr. Dives:

In the spirit of democratic practice, I write this letter as a form of documentation and complaint on work conditions in the City of Harlingen's Sanitation Department as directly and complicitly fostered through the four individuals herein addressed. For thirteen years, I witnessed the emotional stress, personal indecencies, and coercive supervision that my dad, hereafter referred to as "this employee," experienced in his position as a Brush & Debris Equipment Operator in the Brush & Debris Division. My proximity to the situation has allowed me to engage in conversations about these work conditions with current and former employees. In addition, I saw first-hand visuals of extremely dangerous tasks transpiring because of these work conditions.

In these thirteen years, various natural events devastated the Lower Rio Grande Valley. This employee attended to the needs of Harlingen's residents when deadly hurricanes destroyed the Valley—leaving his wife, his daughter, and myself to care for our home. This employee neglected his own health to fulfill responsibilities at work during a global pandemic—risking his family's own well-being. This employee contributed immensely to the survival efforts of Harlingen's residents when Texas froze for a week—while his wife fended for herself at home in

darkness, with fear, and with loneliness. In thirteen years, this employee modeled and continues to model the City of Harlingen's community values and unwavering ethos.

However, I witnessed the perverse work conditions that this employee navigated daily. For instance, I recall when this employee performed tasks outside his scope of responsibilities for almost a year to assist in the Division of Landfill. Rather than viewing this act as a courtesy to the department and Harlingen's residents, supervisory personnel demanded that this employee fulfill these duties outside his scope of official responsibilities and training. As of writing this letter, the City of Harlingen's employment website showcases four distinct job postings for the Sanitation Department: Equipment Operator II-Landfill (one position open), Solid Waste Drive/San/B&D (one position open), Equipment Operator I (three positions open), Brush & Debris Equipment Operator (one position open)—for a total of six open positions, which does not reflect an additional position now vacant since the termination of this employee. The postings describe distinct positions, official responsibilities, and equipment, yet coercive supervisory decision and action force Sanitation Department employees to perform tasks outside of their official duties and training. It's a deliberate and strategic way to make employees work more in a perpetual state of understaffing.

The four job descriptions outline different equipment, functions, and requirements, but one crucial responsibility and duty reverberates in all four descriptions: observe safety regulations and communicate unsafe conditions. But this workplace environment does not permit for the enactment of this responsibility and duty. In fact, toward the end of his tenure in the Division of Brush & Debris, this employee expressed health and safety concerns on multiple occasions to supervisory personnel when asked to perform, once again, outside his scope of responsibility. Shrinking at the task of improving workplace conditions, the Sanitation Department instead leveraged its supervisory energy, institutional strategies, and official capacities to criminalize this employee and terminate him. The narrative established through official documentation—as misreported by supervisory personnel, signed by the City Manager, and authorized by the HR Department—erroneously depicts an issue and a culprit. The Sanitation Department strategically deployed three police officers to escort this employee off work property and instructed him not to return so as to demean and incite fear in this employee, an event requiring professional counseling to grapple with its mental and emotional impact on this employee. This abuse of power sends a message to this employee as well as others. It states, “Be quiet. Do as you're told. Otherwise, suffer institutional and legal consequence.”

While perpetual understaffing plagues the Sanitation Department, supervisory decision-making and action exacerbates the matter, causing distress and a sense of helplessness in its employees. For instance, current and former employees express extreme hesitation to report supervisory misconduct because they fear retaliation and harassment. Employees base this hesitation on previous interactions with supervisors that include forceful questioning as to why an issue was brought to HR, coercing individuals into more tasks, and patronizing tones during quotidian interactions. While some subordinates believe an oral account or complaint to supervisors suffices to address an issue, supervisory personnel intimately know documentation protocols that benefit themselves and suffocate subordinates. These conditions affect employees' emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, thereby exponentially increasing the probability of workplace accidents, lowering the quality of life, and shortening an employee's length of life.

I've observed videos and photographs of faulty equipment and dangerous practices in the Sanitation Department due to these work conditions. Moreover, I've listened to employees who share that they verbally inform supervisors on faulty equipment only for supervisors to discard this information. For example, a truck lacked a footstep to climb on it. Supervisory personnel deliberately ignored this information, an easy approach because no written documentation existed. This disregard led to the paralysis of an employee. This tone set by supervisors causes employees to stay quiet about work injuries, for they fear losing their jobs. Regretfully, employees still mourn the death of their colleague caused in these work conditions.

Regardless of work conditions, supervisory personnel demand for the job to get done. Regardless of mental, physical, and emotional state, employees get the job done.

Therefore, I pose the following questions.

- The Sanitation Department recently terminated an employee, further aggravating the understaffed situation. What concrete steps is the Sanitation Department taking to counterbalance the workload on current employees so as to minimize physical demand as well as remove undue psychological and mental stress?
- What procedures will the Sanitation Department enact, so employees can document their safety and health concerns so as not to face dismissiveness by supervisors?
- A glaring lack of communicative competency exists in supervisory personnel. What approaches will the Sanitation Department take to acquire these communicative competencies, specifically when engaging subordinates?
- The employees aren't comfortable/knowledgeable with HR processes or documentation. How will the Sanitation Department foster comfort with these processes, so employees can cultivate better work conditions for themselves in their respective divisions?
- The Sanitation Department coercively assigns responsibilities to employees beyond their scope of duties. How will the Sanitation Department address this atrocious habit?
- Negligence permeates. Employees orally inform supervisors on faulty equipment and unsafe conditions, which supervisors can dismiss. What process will intervene in this egregious oversight?

This letter documents the heinous treatment of this employee and others. It counters an erroneous narrative in the City of Harlingen's documentation. This letter as a counternarrative tells the story of an understaffed workplace exacerbated by coercive supervisory practices. But the job will continue. Ground-level employees will place the City's own well-being before their own, for the work environment in the Sanitation Department rejects any other mode of operation. Meanwhile, family members absorb these employees' stress. Meanwhile, family members worry constantly about employees' health and safety. Meanwhile, family members heal the psychological and physical trauma created because of these work conditions. And family members will wonder perpetually: When will this stop?

I await a response to these pressing questions.

With hope,
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