

Providence City Council  
City Hall  
25 Dorrance St.  
Providence, RI 02903

September 18, 2014

Dear Providence City Council Members:

Our organizations have only just learned that you are prepared to give first passage to amendments to the City's lobbying ordinance at your Council meeting this evening. We urge your rejection of this proposal.

As you know, this ordinance has gone through a number of iterations over the past few years, and each time a number of non-profit organizations have raised concerns about them. In short, we have objected that the ordinance is overly broad, vaguely worded, and particularly onerous on small, non-profit agencies like ours. Implemented and enforced to the fullest, we have argued, it would have an extremely chilling effect on robust community advocacy. Despite those concerns, the City Council, both in 2012 and 2013, approved amendments that have only expanded the reach and the scope of the ordinance.

Once again, inexplicably, the Council is prepared to do the same. Even worse, and to our complete bafflement and dismay, the latest amendments are largely aimed explicitly at organizations that rely on non-compensated volunteers to advocate for the community, not big-money interests that one would expect to be the major target of such an ordinance. Specifically, this evening's proposal imposes all the burdens of lobbying registration – and the potentially severe penalties for violating the ordinance – on any volunteer who spends only ten hours or more (reduced from 25 hours) in the course of an entire year engaged in broadly and vaguely defined “lobbying” activities with the City.

It is difficult to think of a more effective way to discourage community activism. To hold a volunteer non-profit Board member to the same onerous standards as those for a multi-million dollar corporation seeking to sway City policy and obtain contracts worth millions of dollars borders on the unconscionable.

Our objections to the current version of the ordinance have been explained in detail in previous letters we have sent the Council, the most recent of which is enclosed, so we will not repeat them here. We write now solely to express our strong opposition to this latest proposal, which only further targets community activism as a problem to be reined in, rather than a vital force to help ensure that Providence's most vulnerable residents are adequately represented in the making of City policy. We fervently hope this troubling proposal will be tabled. Thank you for your time and attention to our views.

Sincerely,

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