



Representative Emilia Strong Sykes Minority Whip

June 13, 2018

Colonel John Born, Director,
Ohio Department of Public Safety
1970 West Broad St.
Columbus, Ohio 43223

Dear Director Born,

I write to bring to your attention a matter of great concern. For the entirety of my tenure as State Representative for Ohio's 34th House District, I have been subjected to extra scrutiny and repeated questions regarding my business at the Statehouse by security staff. This kind of treatment sends the message "You do not belong." As an elected official, that troubles me. The people of the 34th House District sent me here to represent them, not to be told that I don't belong in the Statehouse or fit the physical characteristics of a legislator.

Equally troubling to me, I'm sure those who visit these buildings who are not elected officials or employees also experience extra scrutiny based on their appearance. Director, we need to do something to change this. It is 2018 and we can no longer stick our heads in the sand. This is happening and it has to stop.

I'd like to share some of my experiences to help you see the problem we have before us. In 2015, when new security procedures were put in place, I was hopeful that an objective security protocol would make it easier for me to enter the building where I work. That is not how it turned out. In February of 2016 while walking into the Statehouse with a white male colleague, I was stopped by a State Highway Patrol trooper and told my bag needed to be searched prior to entering the Statehouse, even though I was displaying my Statehouse identification card. I refused to be subjected to an unreasonable search of my personal effects. The encounter was frustrating and upsetting as my white, male colleague was not searched nor stopped, and he even attempted to come to my defense to help explain to the Trooper that I was a legislator. The Trooper's response: I was going to be searched if I planned to enter the building. Although I was able to eventually enter the building, it was not before the Trooper confirmed my suspicions that I was stopped based on my physical appearance, as I was told that I "did not look like a legislator." He must have seen the look on my face because he added that I "looked too young."

Committees:

Finance Committee
Finance Subcommittee on Health & Human Services
Rules and Reference
Ways & Means
Joint Medicaid Oversight Committee
Health

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Soon after the incident, I contacted the Ohio House Sergeant-at-Arms Dan Lay and the chiefs of staff for the Speaker and Minority Leader of the House about the encounter. In response, on February 17, 2016, Mr. Lay confirmed that I handled the situation appropriately and suggested that the Trooper in question was probably new and did not know the protocol. That seemed unlikely because I had seen and been stopped by that Trooper before, but I remained hopeful for change. Mr. Lay assured me that he would look into the issue so that it would not occur again. He copied post commander T. Karwatse, and Trooper E. Meija, the legislative liaison at the time on our communications to inform them of the issue. I was never contacted, or notified of any changes that would eliminate unequal application of security rules by any person in charge of Statehouse security in any capacity. For your convenience the original correspondence is attached to this letter.

Last week, several news outlets reported on my most recent encounter with building security. A few weeks ago I was again stopped even though I had shown my state-issued badge to security staff. The individual followed me and insisted on examining my badge, front and back, more closely. Once again, I was being challenged while entering my workplace and not afforded the same ease of access as colleagues, lobbyists and staff. Since then I have been in communication with several colleagues, specifically white men, who have expressed their disbelief over the treatment I have received, because they have never experienced such treatment. In fact one legislator shared that he never displays his badge and has never had anyone in either the Statehouse or Riffe Office Tower question his presence or require a search before he enters into a building.

Soon after the media reports, I met with representatives from the Ohio State Highway Patrol to discuss the matter. I came away from that discussion realizing several things, one of which was that if I wanted any changes I needed to speak louder and directly to the decision makers, leaders and drafters of the policies that allow for the unequal treatment of people entering the Statehouse and Riffe building.

Please consider this letter as an official complaint. My hope is that this action will initiate changes that will keep myself and others from experiencing unequal treatment and extra scrutiny based on one's gender or skin color, while also ensuring safety in the buildings that you are responsible for securing. I would like to see an appraisal of our security training, policies and practices and I want to see needed reforms made that will ensure that every member of the public, Statehouse employees, lobbyists, advocates and legislators walking through the Statehouse and Riffe Center will be treated fairly and with the same dignity and respect that is afforded to white males.



My objective is simple: to be treated the same as my peers, no matter how I look when entering the Statehouse and other state office buildings, and to ensure that others are also treated fairly and equally as they move through these public buildings.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person, and I look forward to continuing this conversation and will make myself available for any opportunities to do so.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Emilia Strong Sykes".

Emilia Strong Sykes
State Representative
Ohio House District 34

cc:

DAS director
CSRAB president
Ohio House Speaker
Ohio Senate President
Ohio House Minority Leader
Superintendent, OSHP

Enc:

The original complaint