



Spokane Human Rights Commission

Wednesday, May 1st 2019

5:30 PM-7:00 PM

City Hall Lower Level

Council Chambers

TIMES GIVEN ARE AN ESTIMATE AND ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Public Comment Period:

5:30 - 5:40 Public Comment (3 minutes each). Citizens are invited to address the Commission on any topic not on the agenda.

Commission Briefing Session:

5:40 - 5:45 A. Roll Call & Approve the [April 3, 2019 Minutes and March 26, 2019 Minutes](#) Chair Bishop

Discussion Items:

5:45 – 6:15	1) Open Public Meeting Act (OPMA) Presentation	Mike Piccolo
6:15 - 6:30	2) Vote to Close Out Suicide Means Prevention Task Force	Commissioner Lemus
6:30 - 6:40	3) Portrayal of Autism in Local Media	Commissioner Lemus
6:40 – 6:55	4) Housing and Land Deals	Full Commission
6:55 – 7:00	5) Data Tracking	Chair Bishop

Adjournment

1) Next Human Rights Commission meeting is scheduled for **June 5, 2019**

The password for City of Spokane Guest Wireless access has been changed:

Username: COS Guest Password: 95sc56Jb

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA) INFORMATION: The City of Spokane is committed to providing equal access to its facilities, programs and services for persons with disabilities. The Spokane City Council Chamber in the lower level of Spokane City Hall, 808 W. Spokane Falls Blvd., is wheelchair accessible and also is equipped with an infrared assistive listening system for persons with hearing loss. Headsets may be checked out (upon presentation of picture I.D.) at the City Cable 5 Production Booth located on the First Floor of the Municipal Building, directly above the Chase Gallery or through the meeting organizer. Individuals requesting reasonable accommodations or further information may call, write, or email Human Resources at 509.625.6363, 808 W. Spokane Falls Blvd, Spokane, WA, 99201; or msteinolfson@spokanecity.org. Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing may contact Human Resources through the Washington Relay Service at 7-1-1. Please contact us forty-eight (48) hours before the meeting date.

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA) INFORMATION: The City of Spokane is committed to providing equal access to its facilities, programs and services for persons with disabilities. The Council Briefing Center in the lower level of Spokane City Hall, 808 W. Spokane Falls Blvd., is wheelchair accessible and also is equipped with an infrared assistive listening system for persons with hearing loss. Headsets may be checked out (upon presentation of picture I.D.) through the meeting organizer. Individuals requesting reasonable accommodations or further information may call, write, or email Human Resources at 509.625.6363, 808 W. Spokane Falls Blvd, Spokane, WA, 99201; or msteinolfson@spokanecity.org. Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing may contact Human Resources through the Washington Relay Service at 7-1-1. Please contact us forty-eight (48) hours before the meeting date.



Spokane Human Rights Commission
ATTN: Neighborhood Services
808 W Spokane Falls Blvd,
Spokane, WA 99201

Commissioners,

As you know I have been struggling with finishing a final report for the Suicide Means Prevention task force. Writing has never been my strong suite. On 4/22/19 I attended a meeting convened by the Prevent Suicide Spokane coalition a partnership between Spokane Regional Health District and local nonprofit Fail Safe 4 Life.

The coalition invited 50+ individuals to this planning meeting and there are more to be invited to the table. Staff for SHRD who facilitated this first meeting accomplished in four hours' time what I have been trying to accomplish for about a year a clear vision and path to focus on. As we know best practice is to accomplish work in a collaborative fashion. I have done what I can with the skills I have especially with the lack of resources from the city to the task force.

Tonight, am seeking permission via a vote from the commission to shut down the Suicide Means Prevention Task Force. Knowing that mental health is one of our priority focus areas within my commissioner role I will continue to attend the meetings of the Prevent Suicide Spokane Coalition.

As apart of the close out process I will pass my work over to SRHD staff as well as hold a briefing for council and administration on what we heard through the community listening sessions as well as ask SRHD and Fail Safe 4 Life Staff to give them an update on the new coalition efforts.

Thank you for your consideration,

Commissioner Lemus

Rob Curley, Editor, Spokesman-Review:

As individuals and organizations that support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in our community, the I/DD Champions Network respectfully wishes to call attention to news reports that may have unjustly influenced the way the general public perceives people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, namely, autism.

On Sunday, April 7, the body of a local anesthesiologist, Dr. Rex C. Porter, was found at his home in Spokane Valley. Circumstances surrounding the incident were troubling and have prompted the Spokane County Sheriff's Department to regard Dr. Porter's death as "suspicious," meaning that the facts are as yet unknown and should be investigated.

On April 9, 2019 the *Spokesman-Review* published a story about the incident with which we have profound concerns, including:

- 1) The naming of Dr. Porter's son, Derek, in the story. As a vulnerable adult, Derek's identity should have been more carefully guarded. If Derek had a guardian, his identity should not have been made public without that guardian's consent. Moreover, releasing Derek's name in addition to his diagnosis may have been a violation of federal HIPPA laws.
- 2) Derek's portrayal in the story as a suspect in Dr. Porter's death. The reality is that nobody knows how Dr. Porter died, nor how his remains came to be deposited as they were, partially burned in a fire pit on the property. Nevertheless, Derek is featured prominently throughout the story, first as Dr. Porter's son, then as a surprise figure in the investigation, having "what appeared to be blood" on his shorts and a cut on his foot, and finally as a suspect, some anonymous family member reporting that "Derek can be violent and has attacked Rex in the past."
- 3) The prominence of Derek's diagnosis of autism. While Derek may indeed have autism, why that fact is relevant to this story is not clear. And because that connection is not clear, the underlying suggestion, when taken in the context of Derek's portrayal as a suspect, is that Derek's autism played a role in the death of his father—in short, that Derek murdered his father, dismembered his body, and tried to hide the evidence by burning it—that that in some inexplicable way autism drove him to do it.

And that is the problem. While such salacious reporting might sell newspapers, it does not reflect the truth. Indeed, the story clearly contradicts the *Spokesman-Review's* own Newsroom Values Statements relative to

- FAIRNESS AND IMPARTIALITY – "Stories in the Spokesman-Review will be as fair as possible to all parties involved, and as thorough and complete as possible."
- THE PRIVACY OF SOURCES AND THOSE WE WRITE ABOUT – "When reporting on people who find themselves in newsworthy situations, we'll cover their situations with compassion and respect for their general privacy. Information about the newsworthy event must be covered, but information about private lives should be balanced against the legitimate public interest."
- TRUTH – "It's worth stating the obvious: Journalists seek truth. Our credibility depends on our ability to be accurate, balanced and independent with our news report."

This story's portrayal of Derek stigmatizes all people with autism, and we take issue with it because it is untrue.

It is untrue because what role Derek might have played in his father's death is not yet known—and may never be known. In that case, speculating about what might have happened without evidence is simply spreading rumors that may harm Derek's chances of receiving a fair trial.

It is untrue because, even if Derek was involved, it will be virtually impossible for anyone to know why. In that case, Derek's autism becomes nothing more than a scapegoat, something to blame in the face of a tragedy too deep to comprehend and asserting an unjust perception of people with autism in the public's eye.

And it is untrue simply because it is untrue—people with autism are no more prone to violence than anyone else. In a study of Swedish youth published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* in 2017, research clearly showed that a diagnosis of autism alone was not an indicator of a propensity toward violence. In fact, it indicated exactly the opposite—that people with autism were less likely to commit violence than people with typically developed brains. While the study did identify several psychiatric disorders that were indicators of increased violence, autism was not one of them.

We also take issue with this portrayal of people with autism because it has been around for way too long. The myth that people with I/DD are inherently dangerous is so deeply ingrained in our minds that we can no longer see it for what it is. Recall John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*, where Lennie, a man with a developmental disability, kills a woman by accident. So ubiquitous is this idea that it pervades even what we consider to be great literature.

But the notion is as stale as it is wrong. People hold to it because they don't know what else to do; they don't know what think of people who are so different from them. Autism makes many people uncomfortable, and it is always easier to judge people who are different than it is to seek to understand them.

What we ask is a greater commitment from the *Spokesman-Review* to seek to understand people with autism, and a more concerted effort to eradicate the stigmas that this news report has inadvertently promoted. April is *National Autism Awareness* month, and recently the *Spokesman-Review* published an article featuring several facts and statistics about autism.

Now get beyond facts and statistics. Meet people who are autistic, celebrate their abilities, acknowledge their accomplishments, affirm their contribution to a world that often looks, acts and thinks too much like itself. Celebrate the wonderful difference that autism brings to our World, and when tragedy brings darkness into it, don't be too quick to reach for the easy answer by making autism a scapegoat. Be better than that.

As the eyes and ears of the public, America's news outlets have to be better than that—so the rest of the world can be better than that too.

Respectfully, the following members of the I/DD Champions Network:

Sima Thorpe, Executive Director, The Arc of Spokane

Jess Silvernail, Parent of a child with Autism and Advocate

John Lemus, District 2 Commissioner Spokane Human Rights Commission

Brian Behler, CEO, Skills'kin

Doug Overlock, Executive Director, Parents' Cooperative Society, Inc.

Deborah Finck, BUILDING OHANA

Cathryn Maland, Director of Person Centered Planning and Community Inclusion, Compass

Autism Society of Washington, Spokane Chapter

Compass Career Solutions Spokane

Tom Weddle, Parent, Consultant and Advocate

Brett Faison, Member of the I/DD Champions Network

Brian Holloway, Director of Advocacy and Family Support, The Arc of Spokane

Helen Black, Parent and Individual Advocate for The Arc of Spokane

Nikki Lockwood, Parent in the Community

David Morris, Member of the I/DD Champions Network

Terri Crites, Member of the I/DD Champions Network

Tami Dillon, Member of the I/DD Champions Network

