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Public was disrespected

Author(s): 6 **Date:** October 30, 2010 **Section:** Editorial

Government employees work for the public. They earn their livelihoods through tax dollars. As a result, government **departments** have a fundamental obligation to handle public funds responsibly and transparently. There should be no shoddy bookkeeping, no difficulty in following how funds are received and distributed. This shows proper respect to the public.

All of those points ought to be obvious. They certainly are important to taxpayers. But the **Omaha Fire Department** has had difficulty in appreciating them. A new report from **State Auditor** Mike Foley describes how long-standing payroll habits at the **department** have fallen far short of appropriate standards and ill served the public.

Here's how the **auditor's** report concluded:

"While evaluating the payroll procedures and records, we noted the **Department** has almost no internal controls over the payroll process. In addition, supporting documentation for amounts paid was woefully inadequate.

"In many instances, the **Department** was unable to produce documentation for leave and working out of class paid. There appears to be no useful documentation of hours worked by staff, and any documentation that is available is not consistently used in the preparation of payroll."

Plus: Foley rightly expressed his frustration that **fire** union officials did not cooperate fully when the auditing staff examined hours worked on union business. "It raises a giant red flag," Foley said. "It is troubling when people will not answer routine, simple questions."

Plus: The nonprofit Kloewer Fund, set up more than 30 years ago to help pay for training, equipment and other **fire** safety-related efforts,

lacked proper documentation. The World-Herald reported last January that the fund was nearly depleted due to loose accounting and ambitious spending.

The **Omaha Fire Department** needs to conduct itself the way most government entities in Nebraska do - with professional payroll procedures that provide the transparency and accountability that taxpayers expect and deserve. The years of sloppy documentation and departmental arrogance need to come to an end. The procedural failures the **auditor** reported on were unprofessional and alarming.

The Suttle administration already has been moving to address some of these problems. City Finance Director Pam Spaccarotella, an impressive professional, is focusing on the issue.

Fire Chief Mike McDonnell needs to help the **department's** reputation - and his own - by insisting, loud and clear, that these failures won't be tolerated. His job, after all, is to act like a manager and not an extension of the **fire** union.

Mayor Jim Suttle has rightly moved to pursue various efficiencies in **Fire Department** operations. These troubling findings by the **auditor** no doubt will give more momentum to further efficiency efforts.

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