

February 24, 2026
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Attorney Ray Sugarman
City of Seattle
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600 4th Ave
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Dear Attorneys, Vold and Sugarman:

I write to submit a formal complaint against Deputy Mayor Brian Surratt who engaged in workplace misconduct by threatening me while I was on vacation celebrating my 50th birthday. Given the city's efforts to tarnish my name, character, and reputation through defamatory accusations and allegations, I thought it imperative to get my complaint filed quickly despite being on FMLA to support my mother during her breast cancer surgery.

I am a lifelong Seattle resident and a product of Seattle Public Schools. I began my tenure, in a city I love and in a role I love tremendously, as Director of the Office of Civil Rights on February 14, 2022. For the first time in ten years, the Office of Civil Rights is fully staffed after having a higher vacancy rate than the Seattle Police Department prior to my arrival. Historically, the office has also had a backlog of civil rights complaints. For three years, that backlog has been eliminated. For more than four years, we have consistently received positive feedback from our team and from the greater community. For example, 86% of my team reported satisfaction in the workplace at the end of 2024. We have also accomplished so much for the communities we serve in a short timeframe. We provided racial equity and social justice trainings to hundreds of City employees to support them in including racial equity principles into programs, policies, budgets, practices, and department culture. We intentionally anchored department work in civil rights history and community stories through training and immersive learning experiences. Additionally, our Commissions had some phenomenal accomplishments in 2025, including:

- **LGBTQ Commission:** Partnered with Mayor Harrell and City Councilmembers on the LGBTQ Pride Flag Raising celebration, legislation strengthening protections for people seeking gender-affirming and reproductive health care, and a proclamation that stands against transphobia in honor of Transgender Day of Remembrance.
- **Human Rights Commission:** Hosted a Human Rights Community Resource Fair and screened *Evicting the American Dream*, a film that humanizes eviction and homelessness.
- **Women's Commission:** Collaborated with City leaders and the Human Services Department to proclaim October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month and honor survivors and advocates. We also hosted a community-led art show highlighting survivors' stories of healing and resilience.

I am looking forward to continuing this important work no matter who serves as mayor.

On January 3, 2026, I received a call from Andres Mantilla who serves as a contractor to the City of Seattle and as Mayor Wilson's Transition Director. He asked if I planned to leave the Office of Civil Rights as several of my colleagues were planning to leave the City. I responded that I did not plan to leave.

Mr. Mantilla stated he received information that a Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) Director resigned. I told him that was untrue as Denise Daniels remains in the role. At the time, I had not realized he was referencing a past director, Roderick Morrison, who served in the role for only five months. He went on FMLA for six months and subsequently resigned.

On January 13, 2026 at 3:30pm, I met with Mayor Wilson and Mr. Mantilla. In that meeting, I shared my vision for the office, some of our accomplishments, and immediate goals for 2026. Given that our office and its staff is protected by Seattle City Ordinance 125470 and can only be fired for cause, I thought it imperative to ensure alignment with Mayor Wilson and her team early. Additionally, I clarified the confusion on Roderick's departure in the event they wanted to continue discussions on personnel. Mr. Mantilla indicated he had incorrect information and said there was

no further discussion needed and furthermore, nothing to worry about. Mr. Mantilla stated he would contact me in 48 hours and walked me out the meeting.

Prior to the meeting with Mayor Wilson, I learned that someone at PROTEC17 was spreading misinformation about me and attempting to construct a negative narrative about my character and reputation.

I heard from Mr. Mantilla again during a scheduled phone meeting January 17, 2026. During that call, he indicated that Mayor Wilson resonated deeply with the work I was doing around belonging. He said they wanted to meet again to further explore workforce.

Two days later, on Tuesday January 19, 2026, Mr. Mantilla stated that Mayor Wilson wanted me to join the administration (again, I was surprised by this being a conversation point because my position is protected by city ordinance), however, they would not be including me in an upcoming announcement on January 22, 2026. He stated they may announce me later or not at all.

I did not hear from Mr. Mantilla again.

My next contact from the Wilson Administration was February 6, 2026, when Deputy Mayor Brian Surratt called me at 5:35pm while I was on my birthday vacation. I missed the call. On his voicemail, message he acknowledged that he knew I was traveling, but he needed to speak with me about “a fairly urgent matter”. I sent him a text on Saturday, February 7, 2026 and asked if he could call me in 10 minutes. We spoke at 9:50am. During our seven-minute call, he stated that a story would be coming out from Erica Barnett and that it was really bad. He stated that half my staff complained, and I was under scrutiny for creating a hostile work environment, sexual harassment, and sexism. These claims had me flabbergasted. Deputy Mayor Surratt made a rookie mistake. Generally, when someone can point to a story coming out, its author, and its contents—they were in fact the source. Sadly, he appears to have worked in tandem with a reporter who has demonstrated a pattern and practice of writing fact-free, negative stories about Black people working with the city—primarily, Black men. The piece, filled with anonymous sources, mistruths, and misrepresentations, reads more like a hit job than journalism. It is devastating to learn that people in the Cabinet would work to coordinate such a piece going so far as to direct a few disgruntled staff—current and former—to the reporter.

On that call, he threatened me by saying I only have two options: either resign immediately or things would “get really ugly” for me. I shared my remarkable disappointment on the call. I felt like he assumed these allegations, whatever they were, were factual. I have yet to receive any complaint, report, or allegation from anyone at the City. I only received notice of an investigation after I emailed you, Attorney Sugarman, to make you aware of Deputy Mayor Surratt’s threatening actions on February 11, 2026 and to inquire about an alleged HR complaint based upon false allegations. The very next day, on February 12, 2026, I received notice of a confidential investigation from Quinn Dennehy.

Let me make it clear: I have no intention of resigning. I plan to defend my character and professional reputation against these false claims.

I informed the Deputy Mayor that I would retain counsel and I would call him back after I returned from vacation. After I settled into my shock and disappointment, I responded with a text message on February 7, 2026, that stated:

“Hello DM Surratt,

Pardon the delay in my response. When you called, I was in complete shock about the allegations being leveled against me and could not adequately formulate a response. I am confident that an investigation will absolve me of any wrongdoing and I will be vindicated. I am in discussions with counsel about legal action to protect my character and reputation given the defamatory nature of the allegations.”

On February 9, 2026, I sent another text message:

“Good morning DM, Surratt, quick question has an internal investigation already begun?”

On February 9, 2026, I received a voicemail message from Deputy Mayor Surratt where he told me to call him, and he would tell me everything he knew. However, I was uncomfortable having verbal conversations after his blatant attempt to force me to resign amid false allegations.

I responded via text two days later, realizing that it was not in my best interest to communicate with him. On

February 11, 2026, I sent the following:

“Deputy Mayor Surratt:

Thank you for your earlier message indicating that you would tell me what you know. However, given the nature of our last call, while I was on vacation celebrating 50 years of life, I do not believe that would be appropriate.

The threat issued that “this would get really ugly for” me led me to reach out to my attorneys. If you’d like to have a

conversation, they need to be present. I do not feel safe in a work environment that is rooted in threats and damaging to the professional reputation I have carefully established over the course of several decades. Additionally, I eagerly await the requested complaints from HR. One of us followed protocol here."

Deputy Mayor Surratt's actions are a textbook example of workplace misconduct. I am requesting that you urge him to retain any correspondence with the reporter, members of my team, and members of the cabinet whether texts on official or personal devices, emails, or direct messages about this matter.

Finally, please be advised that defamation does not meet the standard of "for cause." Therefore, I intend to remain in my role as the Director of the Office of Civil Rights. I would urge HRIU and the City Council to redirect their energy from these baseless claims and examine why 50% of Black department heads have been relieved of their duties under this administration. This alone signifies why I must stay and so must this Department.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. I look forward to discussing next steps. I have opted out of confidentiality for this complaint in the same way the city did with the allegations against me. If you all can coordinate with a reporter to publish falsehoods about me, it is only just that facts be shared with the citizens of our great city through various publications as well as to the council members who represent them and have jurisdiction over my office. The truth, indeed, shall set us free.

Sincerely,
Derrick

Derrick Wheeler-Smith
Director, Office of Civil Rights