

CHANGE ID CARDS

Recently, the Winston-Salem Police Department announced it would support the issuance of identification cards by the group CHANGE. There has been a tremendous amount of discussion and misinformation regarding this action. In an attempt to correct the misinformation, we are presenting the following.

The WSPD is charged with maintaining community safety, order, and improving the quality of life for the entire community. The primary methods to accomplish these goals are education, prevention and enforcement. While voluntary compliance is preferred, sometimes enforcement by charging or physical arrest is necessary. When an arrest is deemed to be the appropriate course of action, WSPD does so within the context and parameters as set out by the constitutions, the law, court decisions, and agency procedures.

When the police interact with people, sometimes it is necessary or beneficial to know who the person is. In these cases, the possession and presentation of official government identification such as a driver's license or identification card is preferred. Significant faith and credit are given to these items. However, some people do not have these types of officially recognized forms of identification. With all persons, but especially these persons, the police look to other items the person might have. This could include any type of document that has some form of identifying information. These items are not given the same weight or full faith and credit as officially issued government identification.

However, these other forms of identification, potentially provide some amount of information to aid in a possible identification. Anything the person has is an aid to law enforcement as the police try to perform their lawful duties and tasks to protect the community. It is understood that the information gained from these sources may or may not be accurate, or may be accurate to varying degrees. But having some type of information to identify a person is preferred to not having anything.

The identification cards being issued by CHANGE offer your police officers the ability to possibly be more efficient and effective in serving and protecting you. These cards have a photograph, name, address, and date of birth. This type of information is very useful in assisting to identify the person involved. Because the issuing entity is not a government entity, the card does not carry the same weight as a government issued item. But it is better than nothing, and can help in the identification process. It has value like a library card, grocery store card, etc. It is not accepted as proof positive of identity, but rather a piece of information that can help in the identification process.

CHANGE issues the cards and pays for them. WSPD has nothing to do with it. We did provide some input into the process though to try to make it more useful for the police as we try to serve the community. CHANGE requires the following as part of their issuance process:

A government issued ID, or
A consulate matricula, or
A birth certificate

And

Proof of address such as utility bill, pay stub, rent receipt, etc
Attendance at a CHANGE meeting
Annual renewal of the card

CHANGE is requiring seeing the originals and will keep a copy in their files. Does all of this guarantee accuracy or proof positive of identity, no it doesn't. And we are not accepting it as proof positive. It is one piece of information to assist in the identification process.

We announced our involvement with the card for many reasons. We believe in transparency and informing the public about this indicates that there is nothing to hide. Also, by announcing it, more people without identification may seek to attain these cards. We would certainly prefer a government issued form of identification, but for various reasons that may not happen. If people have some form of identification on them that possesses this type of basic information (photograph, names, address, date of birth), it has the potential to provide more information and shorten the interaction.

Some have argued that we should positively identify everyone we come in contact with. While that would certainly help increase community safety, there are constitutional issues that are impacted. Also to positively identify everyone we contact would require significant time and resources that remove the officer from their beats. There are times when positive identification is needed and times where it is less critical. It is a balance that must be achieved.

Regarding the group CHANGE itself. We are not supporting, endorsing, or assisting them as it relates to any agenda, views, or opinions they may or may not possess. This is a practical community safety issue, wherein a person having some form of identification on them is better than not having any. WSPD works with a variety of organizations if it has the potential of benefitting the community. People having some form of photo identification with basic information are good for the community. It may or may not be accurate, but it certainly provides some degree of information that is more and better than nothing, or just what the person says.

We would strongly prefer that all persons have an official government issued form of identification. But for various reasons this may not be the case. Our efforts are focused on increasing community safety and we believe that this will help in that effort.

Scott Cunningham, PhD
Chief of Police
Winston-Salem Police Department