

Effectiveness of Citizen Police Oversight

Objective

Our objective was to determine whether the Austin Police Department implemented changes to policies and practices as recommended by the Citizen Review Panel.

Background

The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) was established in 2001 as part of a labor agreement between the City of Austin and the Austin Police Association (APA). In their role of providing citizen oversight of the Austin Police Department (APD), the CRP could review two different categories of cases: those brought by complainants and those involving serious issues such as officer-involved shootings. In both cases, the CRP could make non-binding recommendations to the Chief of Police.

Between October 1, 2013 and December 29, 2017, we identified at least 28 memos written by the CRP that contained 54 recommendations to the Chief of Police. We also identified 10 response memos from the Chief of Police that discussed 17 of those recommendations.

The previous labor agreement expired on December 29, 2017. In January 2018, the Interim City Manager suspended the CRP from further operations, due to the loss of access to confidential material needed to review cases. The City and APA restarted labor agreement negotiations in 2018.

What We Found

Citizen oversight did not create substantive change within the Austin Police Department, largely due to the effects of City procedures and police department practices. We identified five causes why oversight was not more effective, including:

- City policies prevented the CRP from communicating directly with the Chief of Police, which may have affected the integrity of the oversight;
- The City did not establish clear responsibility for maintaining CRP recommendations, which resulted in an incomplete list of recommendations and limited the CRP's ability to identify trends or review past activities;
- There was generally a significant gap between the date an incident occurred and when the CRP heard an APD presentation of the case, which limited the CRP's ability to issue effective and timely recommendations;
- Incomplete or unavailable information at CRP meetings may have affected the CRP's understanding of an incident and their recommendations; and
- The Chief of Police was not required to respond to CRP recommendations, which seems to have resulted in the CRP issuing repeat recommendations.

Additionally, information created by the Citizen Review Panel was not fully protected or retained because the City did not provide adequate resources and training to panelists.

What We Recommend

Since the CRP is currently not operating, we recommend that the City Manager pursue opportunities for citizen oversight in the future, including:

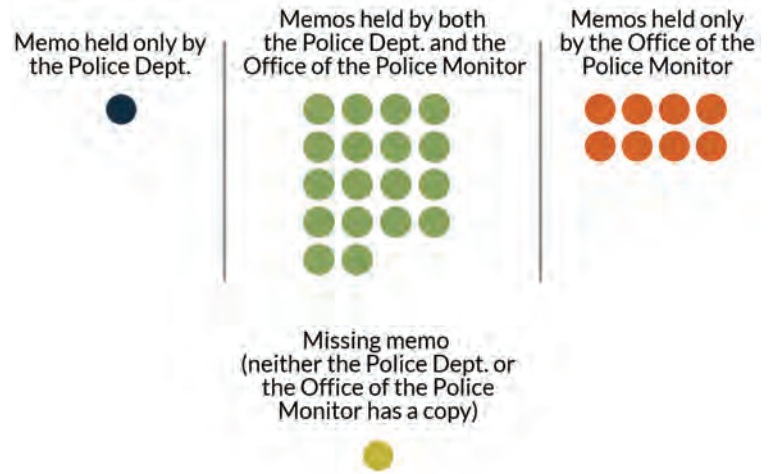
- Establishing clear responsibilities to ensure that records are maintained, cases are heard in a timely manner, and the Chief of Police responds to recommendations from a City-designated citizen oversight body;
- Ensuring that administrative procedures governing the citizen oversight process align with labor agreement provisions;
- Proactively releasing memos issued by a City-designated citizen oversight body as well as any responses produced by APD; and
- Protecting City information by providing appropriate resources and training to members of a City-designated citizen oversight body.

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Overview of Police Oversight Documents Identified



No Single City Department Held All the CRP Memos



Communications Process Among Entities Involved in Police Oversight

The Citizen Review Panel did not communicate directly with the Chief of Police.



The Citizen Review Panel did not receive the final memo or any response from the Police Department.