



Civilian panel on police starts work

The executive director of the Providence External Review Authority says the agency will have to earn the trust and respect of residents, elected officials and the police.

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PROVIDENCE -- Three years after it was created as a oversight agency to investigate allegations of police misconduct, the Providence External Review Authority has opened.

Located at 550 Broad St., near Broad and Comstock Avenue, the agency held an open house Friday to announce its opening to the public.

Created with the high ideal of helping restore public trust in the Providence Police Department, leaders of the authority, PERA, say the agency operates under the watchful eye of people from throughout the city.

Leon C. Drezek, executive director of PERA, said it will have to earn the trust and the respect of the community, elected officials and the police.

"We will have to do a professional, just and equitable job," Drezek said.

The debate over whether the city should have a civilian oversight committee to handle complaints has been waging for years. Calls for a committee increased after Sgt. Cornell Young Jr. was fatally shot by two fellow officers in 2000 and

after Jennifer Rivera, a 15-year-old witness to a homicide, was fatally shot outside her home the same year.

Commissions created at the city and state level reviewed the cases and made recommendations that endorsed the idea of the civilian oversight panel.

In 2002, the city council passed an ordinance that established PERA.

Drezek said PERA has the mission and authority to investigate, conduct hearings and make findings of fact concerning allegations of misconduct on the part of Providence police officers.

While the board does not have subpoena power, it can ask the City Council to request a subpoena, Drezek said.

Drezek said the process of implementing the ordinance and setting up the agency took time because board members had to review the way the many other civilian oversight bodies nationwide worked.

"They were creating something that didn't exist," he said, explaining why it took time to establish a foundation for the process, including policies, procedures and guidelines for the oversight agency, which is a city agency. The staff includes Drezek and a secretary.

PERA board members also took time to find space in an easily accessible spot on a bus line.

Residents who allege they were victims of police misconduct, such as excessive force, foul language, harassment, theft, discrimination or failure to provide timely service can file a complaint with PERA.

PERA will investigate and, if warranted, will hold an administrative hearing to be overseen by a five-member panel.

After making its findings, PERA will make recommendations for disciplinary action to the police chief.

The five people who will hear a case will be randomly selected from PERA's 20-member board. The board has 16 members and four vacant seats; Drezek said the board is awaiting approval or appointment of the last four members.

Drezek, who was hired as executive director five months ago, served 21 years as a federal agent for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Naval Criminal Investigative Service and seven years with the Connecticut Office of Adult Probation.

While the agency might have to earn the trust of skeptics, Drezek said he and board members believe the civilian oversight process will be more thorough, fair, equitable and credible than the Police Department's former civilian complaint process.