



CITYWATCH

Civilian review board finds a mixed welcome

BY SARAH GOLDSTEIN

Three years after city council passed an ordinance creating the Providence External Review Authority (PERA), the non-judicial civilian review board has finally opened its doors. In a ribbon cutting ceremony at PERA's headquarters at 550 Broad St. on Friday, June 24, Mayor David N. Cicilline spoke enthusiastically about the potential of having a group to review citizen complaints of police misconduct, saying, "PERA is here to make a more efficient and transparent PPD." Although Cicilline has fostered some significant improvements in the police department since taking office in 2003, the Providence residents in attendance echoed the need for greater transparency in government. From their perspective, PERA is a significant tool to counter the tendency of police officers to band together when challenged behind a "blue wall of silence."

According to its mission statement, PERA "is to investigate allegations of misconduct on the part of officers of the Providence Police department, to make findings of fact and to make recommendations of potential disciplinary action to the chief of police." While many major American cities had an external review body of some kind by the mid-'90s, PERA will be the first of its kind in Providence. Asked why it took so long to move forward after the city council created the ordinance, PERA chairman Paul Caswell cited the complex work of recruiting 20 qualified board members, hiring an executive director, and drafting such appropriate literature as a guideline of disciplinary actions for cases of misconduct.

PERA does not, however, have the authority to enforce penalties, and though police chief Dean Esserman must provide an explanation to the city council should he decide to reject the group's recommendations, he is under no

obligation to accept its findings. Esserman, who stayed at the ceremony just long enough for the ribbon cutting, declined comment.

Robert Paniccia, president of the Providence chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, maintains that the Police Officer's Bill of Rights trumps PERA, and the FOP, he says, will take legal action against PERA if and when charges are raised against an officer. Paniccia believes that the Providence department, because of the Police Officer's Bill of Rights, is in a unique situation compared with departments that have to comply with the findings of external review boards. Citing the termination of two officers for misconduct in 2004, he says there are enough effective guidelines and disciplinary procedures already in place. Paniccia calls PERA "a political machine that makes politicians look good."

The friction with the FOP notwithstanding, PERA executive director Leon Drezek, formerly an investigator for the US Food and Drug Administration, says he has spent a lot of time talking with union leaders, and that relations remain "very aboveboard, very professional — I would expect nothing less from police officers." For his part, Caswell is confident that institutional mistrust toward PERA will change "when they understand that we are fact-finders — we are trying to be as fair and objective as possible, and we'll see what will happen."

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