

Behind the Badge: Complaints welcomed

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Like other departments, the Council Bluffs Police Department has a procedure in place to deal with complaints from the public.

The Council Bluffs Police Department has a full-time supervisor assigned to the position of internal affairs investigator. In some departments, this position is referred to as "Professional Standards" rather than internal affairs.

The internal affairs investigator fills what is arguably one of the most important positions within the department. The investigations undertaken by this unit reflect on the department as a whole. An investigation must be timely, must be thorough and must be complete. This, at times, means asking questions of your fellow officer that may not be pleasant but must be asked.

Sir Robert Peel stated: "The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions." If a department considers themselves "above" the community they serve, they will not have the respect and cooperation needed to effectively provide quality police services.

This does not mean that the public will decide how to run the department. It means that every officer must conduct himself or herself in an acceptable manner. Officers must understand that their job performance is monitored by the public and their actions, or lack of action, determine the creditability of the department.

We gladly accept complaints from our citizens, and each complaint is investigated by a supervisor.

We have broken down the complaints into two categories: A class one and class two. Class one complaints are a serious allegation and will be handled by the Internal Affairs division. Class two complaints usually involve a complaint against an officer's attitude or language. These will be handled by the shift commander of that shift. As the chief of police, I will decide whether the complaint will be classified as class one or class two.

It is apparent that our occupation breeds the possibility of complaints because not everyone is happy to see the police and may disagree with the actions we have taken. Most people do not like to go to jail or receive a ticket. Therefore, complaints do come to the department.

Some complainants might not understand the actions taken by the officer and believe the officer should have handled himself or herself differently.

A classic example is the way an officer approaches a vehicle during a traffic stop. They are taught to approach in a manner that will keep them safe and able to react quickly to any situation. Some people may not like this and complain that the officer was rude. These types of complaints do happen and they are investigated.

Each investigation must reach a conclusion: They are classified as Sustained, Not Sustained, Unfounded, Exonerated or Inadequate Department Policy.

Each investigation will be reviewed by me, and I will either concur with the results of the investigation or send it back for additional investigation. Each complainant will be notified when an investigation is complete. However, they will not be privileged to the outcome or any action that may be taken by the department, as personnel rules are very specific.

Officers who are the subject of an internal investigation are, obviously, under added stress. We try to complete the investigation as quickly as possible, but no two investigations are the same. Some take longer than others. Some might have to wait until a complaint has gone to court and has received a verdict by a judge, as this is pertinent to the case at hand.

I can tell you that every officer who has ever been involved in an internal investigation will remember their interview with the investigator their entire career.

Lt. Fields, I still can recall ours.

Ralph O'Donnell is chief

of the Council Bluffs

Police Department