

A Look at the City of Spokane Police Ombudsman

FACTS and Frequently Asked Questions

Background: The City of Spokane has created an Office of Police Ombudsman to provide external oversight of the Spokane Police Department. The Ombudsman Office has been designed to feature independence, transparency, professionalism, and meaningful review.

Under the structure that's been established, the Ombudsman will have the authority to:

- Take complaints directly from citizens.
- Determine whether investigations of officers are thorough, complete, and fair, and call for additional investigation when warranted.
- Recommend mediation between police and a citizen when the ombudsman deems that is the best way to resolve a complaint.

The Ombudsman also can follow trends in policing and recommend best practices and track statistics and provide reports on Police Department performance to the City's elected leaders. The City Council approved an ordinance last fall to create the Office of Police Ombudsman, following required negotiations between the City and Police Guild.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does the Ombudsman have independent authority to initiate an investigation?

The Police Ombudsman has the authority to attend and observe all aspects of investigations, recommend additional investigation(s), report inadequacies of investigations, and report on and make recommendations regarding any recurring patterns of insufficient or faulty investigations.

In addition, the Ombudsman may receive complaints from any complaining party, including citizens and members of the Police Department. The Ombudsman will forward those complaints to the Police Department Internal Affairs division for processing and investigation, as appropriate. Meanwhile, the Police Department must notify the Ombudsman of all complaints received and all Internal Affairs investigations.

Does the Police Ombudsman have disciplinary authority over officers?

No. Disciplinary authority over Spokane Police Department employees rests with the Police Chief, who reports to the Mayor. Discipline must be carried out according to City policy and in compliance with collective bargaining agreements. The Ombudsman may bring concerns about discipline to the Mayor.

What was the process for selecting the Police Ombudsman?

The newly created position was advertised nationwide for four weeks in a variety of newspaper, professional and web-based recruitment sources. The City received 127 applications. A screening committee made up of five members, including a representative of the Police Guild, a representative of the Lieutenants and Captains Association, a representative selected by the Mayor, a representative selected by the City

Council, and a member selected by the other four reviewed the applications and identified nine semifinalists who were interviewed by phone. Six candidates were selected for personal interviews. (One of the six withdrew prior to the personal interviews.)

The committee identified its top three finalists, and complete background investigations on them were completed, including interviews in their communities by members of the interview panel. The three finalists were then invited to Spokane to meet the City Council, Mayor and the public in a series of community forums. After receiving feedback from all parties and reviewing the community forum feedback, the Mayor selected her nominated appointee from the three finalists. The City Council is scheduled to vote on the Mayor's appointee on Monday, June 29.

What are the minimum qualifications for the Police Ombudsman position?

The minimum education and experience requirements for the position are:

- College graduate;
- Legal, investigative, or prosecutorial experience and familiarity with police procedures;
- Demonstrated ability to work with confidential information and the ability to review investigations to ensure they are thorough and unbiased;
- Successful completion of criminal background investigation consistent with the requirements to become employed as a Spokane Police Officer;
- Ability to build working relationships with and communicate effectively with diverse groups;
- Record of community involvement.

Why is a former police officer being chosen?

Tim Burns, the candidate selected by the Mayor for the Ombudsman position, has a varied background, including 22 years as a police officer. He left police work 14 years ago, and is currently in charge of neighborhoods and code enforcement in Visalia, Calif. He held a similar neighborhood position in Hollister, Calif., before taking the job in Visalia.

After an extensive selection process, it was determined that having experience as a police officer would certainly aid in understanding best practices of police behavior just as having experience as a community point of contact would aid in understanding community and citizen points of view. Mr. Burns has both experiences.

Will the City Council and Mayor consider modifying the structure and authority of the Police Ombudsman?

Both the City Council and the Mayor have committed to the current structure of the Ombudsman Office. The elected officials will monitor the function closely and will consider necessary modifications to ensure the office operates smoothly and, if necessary, restructure authorities and investigative powers.