Q: Internal Affairs Investigations and Who Should Conduct Them

Internal Affairs investigations are a very important function for all police agencies. In many of the larger agencies, there is an Internal Affairs unit that consists of several officers from the department. Many agencies are moving their Internal Affairs division away from where the main police department is located so people who want to file a complaint against the police agency do not feel intimidated about the process. Some agencies make it mandatory for the individual wanting to file a complaint to complete and sign a complaint form. By failing to investigate a citizen complaint and or making them sign a form before the agency investigates a citizen complaint can cause the public to lose confidence in their police department (Birzer and Roberson, 2008).

I am a Lieutenant with the Los Lunas Police Department, assigned to Professional Standards. We have thirty-six sworn officers in our department. My duties include internal affairs investigations and accreditation. Every supervisor in our department is responsible for the internal affairs function since we are a small agency. As part of our accreditation process, we have implemented a complaint process, where we will take and investigate all complaints even if the person wishes to remain anonymous. Each of our supervisors can be assigned an internal investigation related to one of the officers under their command.

The internal affairs function should be taken on by all supervisors, no matter what their rank is, rather than by an “internal affairs division”. To build and keep public trust, all investigations of police misconduct must be objective, thorough and fair to all (Birzer and Roberson, 2008). Each supervisor within a department should know how to conduct an internal affairs investigation. These investigations should be as familiar as checking a report or reviewing a use of force form, and should be made part of first line supervisor training. Internal affairs should be an important function within a police department and not a stigma.

Over the years law enforcement agencies have lost public trust because of improper use of force cases. This includes the perception that it is difficult for the public to attain recourse against an officer or officers who acted outside of the scope of proper use of force. There is concern that the public has had difficulty filing complaints against officers, and difficulty seeing that their concerns have been fairly addressed. We are...
beginning to see the negative effects of these issues by the lack of trust the public has in law enforcement; police officers are not as often viewed as heroes who will help, but as people who can hurt and get away with it. If we do not investigate and bring action against those officers who are conducting themselves improperly, we will continue to lose the public trust.

Internal Affairs investigations should be a positive action that can restore the public’s trust in law enforcement and also law enforcement’s trust in each other. These investigations should be seen as a positive action both by the public and by law enforcement. These investigations are there to help ensure that law enforcement officers act as they are sworn to do, and also to keep those that don’t off the streets.

Internal Affairs investigations should be a normal part of supervisory duty. This duty should be overseen by an internal affairs specialist, but should be something that supervisors are trained to do. This will reinforce how law enforcement should act and also will help the public to see that it does matter to the departments that their officers are there to protect the public. By having this be a supervisory function it also takes away the stigma of an Internal Affairs Division and makes it a standard function within a department.

References