

EDITORIAL: Eye on police power

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Who watches the watchmen?

It's an ages-old question. Those who are entrusted to guard our safety and uphold our laws are afforded enormous power — even the power of life and death. But what is the most effective check on that power to ensure it is wielded fairly and judiciously?

Monday night at a Panama City restaurant, members of the local chapters of the ACLU and NAACP met with State Attorney Glenn Hess and Bay County Sheriff Frank McKeithen to discuss forming a citizens' oversight committee that would be empowered to investigate corruption and questionable behavior by law enforcement officers. Such boards are common among larger metropolitan areas.

Not surprisingly, Hess and McKeithen were cool to the idea. They believe they do a good job policing the system. Plus, it's only natural to be wary of having someone look over your shoulder and question your work.

There is no question that power must be held accountable. There have been several well-publicized instances in recent years of questionable conduct by law-enforcement officers, from a 64-year-old man being dragged away, thrown against a car and shocked with a Taser while he was trying to comfort an accident victim, to a Parker police officer accused of stalking and murdering his girlfriend while on duty. That has raised questions about what his superiors knew about the situation and when.

The issue is: Is the current system responsive enough?

Hess pointed out that his office determines whether an officer committed a crime after an officer-related death. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement often investigates cases of alleged misconduct by a local police department, although it is not legally required to. Each agency has the authority to handle a situation internally. Citizens can also take complaints to the grand jury, which can conduct a fact-finding review.

McKeithen said his office frequently investigates complaints against officers, but that "99.9 percent" of the time they prove to be unfounded. The BCSO has disciplined its officers in some high-profile cases, notably arresting and firing Benjamin Logue, a deputy accused of sexual battery and tampering with a witness.

But what of the smaller complaints that don't make headlines, but which nonetheless could involve abuse of the police power?

The public needs to have confidence that its concerns are taken seriously, and that police aren't closing ranks to protect their own. Officers often receive the benefit of the doubt because of the dangerous situations they

encounter, when split-second decisions are required and hesitation can be fatal. But distinctions must be made between the proper and the improper.

The best way to achieve trust and accountability is through transparency. What are the complaints, and how are they adjudicated?

A citizens oversight committee is one way to achieve that, but not the only way. It has pitfalls. Many such boards have been criticized for being too deferential to police; others have been hijacked by the professional grievance industry and cop-bashers to promote political agendas, not seek the truth; and some are simply toothless to do anything.

Openness by all law-enforcement agencies would be a welcome start. That would help determine if the current system needs more formal oversight.



Why are State Attorney Glenn Hess and Bay County Sheriff Frank McKeithen so opposed to such a committee being formed? Are they afraid “the truth” might come out? Seems to me that if they have nothing to hide, such a committee would be a welcome change, making a great stride in the direction of fairness for all.