

May 9, 2025

MEMORANDUM

To: Public Safety Committee
From: Karina Bull, Analyst
Subject: Chief of Police Investigation Process

On May 13, 2025, the Public Safety Committee (Committee) will discuss [Council Bill \(CB\) 120977](#), that would amend the City's process for investigating complaints naming the Chief of Police. This memo provides background on Chief of Police investigations, summarizes the legislation, and identifies next steps.

Background on Chief of Police investigations

In 2017, [Ordinance 125315](#) (Accountability Ordinance) established the City's three-pronged police oversight system to (1) ensure that police services are delivered to the people of Seattle in a manner that fully complies with the Constitution and laws of the United States and the State of Washington; (2) ensure public and officer safety; and (3) promote public confidence in the Seattle Police Department (SPD).

In this system, the roles of the three accountability agencies, the Office of Police Accountability (OPA), the Office of Inspector General for Public Safety (OIG), and the Community Police Commission (CPC), are as follows:

- The OPA is an independent, civilian-led office within SPD that investigates misconduct complaints involving SPD employees to ensure that the actions of SPD employees are lawful and in compliance with SPD policies;
- The OIG is an independent office separate from the Executive that reviews and audits the management, practices, and policies of SPD and OPA, including OPA's handling of misconduct complaints; and
- The CPC is a community-based oversight commission that reviews closed OPA investigations and engages the community to develop recommendations on the police accountability system and identify opportunities for systemic improvements.

Although the Accountability Ordinance established standards and procedures for investigating misconduct complaints involving SPD employees, the ordinance did not include a process for ensuring that misconduct complaints naming the Chief of Police would be handled in a fair and transparent manner, free of potential conflicts of interest.

In 2022, [Ordinance 126628](#) created a specific process for OPA's handling of complaints naming the Chief of Police, including but not limited to: (1) conducting a comprehensive intake investigation (intake) for every complaint; (2) requiring civilian supervisors to conduct intakes; (3) recommending classification determinations on whether and how to proceed with investigations; (4) determining whether a City entity (i.e., OPA or the Seattle Department of Human Resources) or non-City entity would perform the investigation depending on the presence of real or potential conflicts of interest and type of allegation(s); and (5) assigning civilian staff to perform investigations.

This process also created an oversight role for OIG including but not limited to: (1) receiving notice of complaints; (2) reviewing and auditing intake and investigations, (3) finalizing classification determinations; (4) providing notifications to City entities and the complainant.

Since Ordinance 126628 went into effect in July 2022, OPA has received over 70 complaints naming the Chief of Police. After several years of implementation, OPA and OIG have signaled that certain aspects of the investigation process limit their ability to efficiently address these complaints. For example:

- **Comprehensive intakes for all complaints** – OPA must conduct a full examination of every complaint regardless of the content or allegations, including complaints that do not allege a plausible violation or present issues that have already been reviewed or adjudicated;
- **Staffing restrictions for conducting intakes** – Only two civilian supervisors are allowed to conduct intakes although there are potentially up to four civilian investigators who could also perform this work;
- **Inconsistent technical requirements** – The investigation standard (i.e., timely, thorough, and *neutral*) is different than the standard established by the Accountability Ordinance (i.e., timely, thorough, and *objective*), and there are varying timeline requirements (i.e., promptly or immediately) for OIG's notifications to City entities and the complainant; and
- **New complaints during an OIG-managed investigation** – There is not an established procedure for handling new complaints that arise during an ongoing investigation managed by OIG.

In addition, there are **limited reporting requirements**. While OIG must provide several notifications (e.g., notice of an open investigation) to City entities and the complainant, the only public reporting requirement is to include the number of complaints closed as a *contact log*¹ in OIG's annual report.²

¹ Under Ordinance 126628, a contact log is a type of classification that resolves a complaint without an investigation. This classification includes circumstances when: (a) the complaint does not involve a potential policy violation by an SPD employee; (b) there is insufficient information to proceed with further inquiry; (c) the complaint has already been reviewed or adjudicated by OPA and/or OIG; or (d) the complaint presents fact patterns that are clearly implausible or incredible, and there are no indicia of other potential misconduct.

² OPA included limited information on complaints naming the Chief of Police in its [2022 Annual Report](#) and [2023 Annual Report](#).

Summary of CB 120977

CB 120977 would amend Ordinance 126628 with the intention of streamlining and clarifying the intake and investigation process to provide staffing flexibility, support procedural efficiency, and increase transparency. The bill would:

- Allow OPA, with OIG's agreement, to close qualifying complaints as a contact log after an initial screening;
- Allow OPA to assign non-supervisory, civilian staff to intakes;
- Allow OIG to initiate and manage the investigation of a new complaint that arises during an ongoing investigation managed by OIG;
- Clarify that all investigations must be timely, thorough and *objective*;
- Establish a consistent requirement for OIG to *promptly* notify City entities and the complainant; and
- Require OIG to include information on complaints, intakes, and investigations naming the Chief of Police in *quarterly reports* for the Mayor, the President of the City Council, and the Chair of the Council's public safety committee, and in its *annual report* for the public.

Next Steps

The Committee will continue discussing and may vote on CB 120977 at the next Committee meeting on May 27, 2025. If the Committee votes to make a recommendation on CB 120977 on that date, the City Council could vote on the legislation as early as June 3, 2025.

cc: Ben Noble, Director
Lish Whitson, Supervising Analyst