

New Report Finds Important Policing Reforms Recommended by Citizen Review Panel, Largely Ignored by APD and City Manager

October 10, 2017 – Austin, TX: Austin’s Citizen Review Panel (CRP) has special access to certain internal investigations of police officer-involved shootings and other incidents. The Panel reviews the incident and may issue a letter of recommendation calling for policy or procedural changes at the Austin Police Department (APD), even if the officer is found to have violated no rules.

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition studied the letters written by the CRP in 2016 to understand the changes recommended, and to determine if the recommendations were resulting in reform.

The review, released in a [report](#) today, revealed significant shortcomings in APD policy – shortcomings that have not been addressed by changes to the Policy Manual or in the meet and confer process. The Panel recommended 18 different, substantive changes at APD, among them these:

- Internal Affairs should interview non-police witnesses to police shootings;
- The Police Chief should launch the citizen review panel process before the 180-day period has expired (temporary suspensions cannot be instituted more than 180 days after the incident date);
- APD policy should be reviewed and changed to institute policies of de-escalation; and
- The Mental Health Officer program should be reviewed and perhaps abolished, to be replaced by a system that can better address calls from people with mental illness.

“Our Citizen Review Panel process isn’t working,” said Chas Moore, founder of the Austin Justice Coalition. “These people get to see the internal investigation after a person is killed. If their urgent recommendations are simply ignored, then we need a completely new approach. That’s only possible if we get rid of the police contract this year.”

“It is outrageous that APD doesn’t routinely interview non-police witnesses when there is a death in custody,” said Chris Harris of Grassroots Leadership. “That is exactly why community groups demanded that the new contract authorize the Citizen Review Panel to call new witnesses and independently investigate. Without these powers, why have a CRP? And if the city won’t push for strong public oversight of police, why even negotiate a new contract?”

“Time after time, Austin’s panelists have agreed that an officer violated no current policies,” said Kathy Mitchell of the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition and the report’s author. “But the panelists have also called, over and over, for changes to those policies because most of the deaths might have been avoided with proper de-escalation, coordination, and assistance from mental health professionals.”