



OpEd

How Could Civic Engagement Strengthen Community Safety?

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The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan organization, encourages citizens to be civically engaged in their communities. Every community has problems, some being common throughout our state and nation. These problems include lack of affordable housing, health care, food security, and safety. To solve the problems, government, businesses, nonprofits, and academic institutions need to work together. But individuals can also contribute by volunteering with civic organizations and using their voices to help find solutions and to encourage others to do the same. That is authentic civic engagement.

We all want to feel safe in our homes, work, and communities. The League supports safety practices for law enforcement officers and the communities they serve. It also supports policies for law enforcement that build public trust and positive collaborative relationships through engagement with community members. One form of engagement could involve an independent community oversight committee as a vehicle for sharing information about policing issues and increasing the flow of information to the public.

Several Las Cruces citizens have developed a proposed ordinance for a Civilian Police Oversight Board, which they want the City Council to consider. But oversight agencies are not always effective and may even exacerbate tensions among local officials, law enforcement, and activists. They need to be empowered with appropriate tools and they require collaboration among other government and community efforts. This would include ongoing training for members of the oversight committee and for police officers.

We know that police officers have a challenging job protecting residents of a community and they generally serve us well. Law enforcement agencies have begun to make changes to improve their services. In Las Cruces, the police department now provides racial bias training and prohibits the use of chokeholds and other types of excessive force.

Seeking external review of complaints about the police, the City of Las Cruces contracted in March 2021 with California-based OIR Group to provide audit reports of completed Las Cruces Police Department (LCPD) internal affairs complaints.

The third audit report is scheduled to be presented at the City Council meeting on February 27, 2023. These reports provide the council and members of the public with information about the handling of police matters. Previous reports are linked on the Council's website. OIR reported in August that the LCPD had responded favorably to feedback provided by the auditor. For example, LCPD is collecting more complete information about the demographics of those involved in incidents and about the outcomes of complaints. The LCPD is also expanding their review process concerning the use of force.

Is this type of external review sufficient or could an independent community oversight committee partner with law enforcement to increase safety and improve quality of life for all residents? How specifically would an effective committee be designed in our community?

The community's voice is essential for solving local problems. Community oversight focused on safety is one example of civic engagement with one complex problem. The League encourages individuals to become more civically engaged with issues of importance to them.

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