

A county-level Use of Deadly Force Investigative Task Force

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police August 8, 2020

Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing

We saw in the last post that St. Petersburg plans to add a civilian to a police review board, but here investigations of city incidents will stay, in a sense, “in house” but handled at the county level.

from Kavitha Surana and Rose Wong, “It’s time to change:’ Police in Pinellas to partner on use-of-force investigations.” Tampa Bay Times, July 21, 2020.

For as long as anyone in Pinellas County can remember, lethal interactions between law enforcement officers and the public were dealt with in the same way: The agency conducted a criminal investigation of their own employee’s actions. “It’s time to change,” said Pinellas Sheriff Bob Gualtieri in an interview with the *Tampa Bay Times*.

In an effort to root out a perceived conflict of interest, major Pinellas law enforcement agencies will no longer investigate their own officers after use-of-force incidents. Instead, they will hand those cases over to partner departments, Gualtieri announced Tuesday.

The new Pinellas County Use of Deadly Force Investigative Task Force will include three homicide detectives each from the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, the St. Petersburg Police Department and the Clearwater Police Department.

Previously, agencies were investigating their own officers.

“An outside agency should take over the investigation, both for the integrity of the process and for community trust that the ultimate

decision reached is just and without bias,” Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister said.

“In the current situation we are in, it’s important we have public confidence,” he said. “No matter how well we have done it or how right we’ve done it, that may not sit right with people moving forward — knowing the agency conducting the investigation of an officer is the employer of that officer.”

“It’s not just important that these investigations be done fairly and objectively and thoroughly — but they have to be perceived by the public and known by the public to be conducted in that manner,” Gualtieri said.

Some expressed skepticism of the new arrangement and called for a non-law enforcement body to review deadly use-of-force incidents.

“That’s not truly independent — it’s police investigating other police,” said Haydee Oropesa, a defense attorney who runs the commentary site FloridaYouJudge.com. “That’s not going to placate the public.”