

## Guest Commentary

# Denver's law-enforcement oversight is working

By Hank Knoche

In August 2004, after a series of controversial police shootings, Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and the City Council proposed a citizen task force to find solutions. Three months later, Denver voters approved new arrangements for oversight of the city's law-enforcement agencies.

The upshot was the creation of a seven-person Citizen Oversight Board and the Office of the Independent Monitor. Richard Rosenthal, the monitor, was to keep an eye on the system for handling complaints and overseeing their investigation by internal affairs bodies. The board, meanwhile, was to monitor his work and pass along suggestions.

The ordinance that established the oversight board requires public outreach and understanding. Its twice-monthly meetings are open to the

public, and every three months, a session is televised.

The new arrangements are working well. A key has been the unstinting cooperation of the city's law-enforcement leaders. Safety Manager Al LaCabe, Police Chief Gerry Whitman, Corrections chief Bill Lovingier and Fire Chief Nick Nuanes have given thoughtful consideration to policy suggestions from the monitor and the citizen board and, in addition, have taken a number of initiatives, with good results.

LaCabe, with the participation of the monitor and the board, has revamped the disciplinary policy of the police department. The new policy is clearer, fairer and more consistent. This month, LaCabe began a similar review of the sheriff's department.

Within the police department, Whitman has instituted a new and improved system of "early warning" that an officer might be close to step-

ping over the line between proper and improper procedure. When the signs are there, the officer's supervisors will provide advice, specialized training or reassignment.

In the sheriff's department, Lovingier has bettered the ways to ensure that deputies are carrying out timely rounds of jail cells. Medical screening of jail inmates has improved.

Plans have been honed for transitioning operations to the new justice center that is now under construction.

The Police Assessment Center in Los Angeles, one of the nation's most respected think tanks for police work, has concluded a study of Denver's police policies, training and procedures. The center says the Denver Police Department today "meets and even exceeds national standards in many areas, making [it] one of a handful of American police departments becoming a national leader."

The board and the monitor stayed

in touch with Denver police, sheriff and fire departments as they planned to meet the challenge of ensuring security at last summer's Democratic National Convention. Aided by reinforcement from nearby jurisdictions and an infusion of federal funds, the challenge was met.

Accomplishments like these show real progress is being made. The number of police on the streets has been increased. Crime rates have dropped in most sectors. But, given the complexity of law-enforcement work, there are bound to be instances of controversy. Officers must be held accountable for improper actions. Denver's safety leadership and oversight arrangements create the conditions to correct poor performance.

From its outset, the citizen board identified racial profiling by police as one of its priorities. Yet many complaints, when investigated by the police department's internal affairs

bureau, are seldom sustained. There are, of course, two sides to the stories. It can get complicated, but the aim is to eliminate biases over time.

Most solutions are long-term. We must first do a better job of screening police recruits to deny employment to those with biased tendencies. And we must improve the training of police personnel, sensitizing them to citizen perceptions and teaching them the differences between proper and improper confrontations.

We need better information about what really transpires at the time of the confrontations. One way to accomplish this would be to install cameras in police cars. Recording incidents could provide the kind of evidence not now available.

*Hank Knoche of Denver is a board member of the Citizens Oversight Board. He is a former Central Intelligence Agency deputy director.*