

# Complainant Experience: Report & Recommendations

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**Seattle** Office of  
Police Accountability

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## Introduction

OPA's core function is to investigate complaints of alleged police misconduct. As with any service, it is vital to periodically evaluate aspects of that service's effectiveness from the users' perspective and look for areas in which improvements can be made.

OPA last collected feedback directly from complainants in 2016-2017, prior to Director Myerberg's tenure. In order to gather more current information, in the fall of 2019, a team of OPA staff began an assessment of the "complainant experience." Due to staffing changes and resource constraints, the full assessment was not completed until mid-2021.

This report is divided into two sections. Part 1 summarizes the five components of the assessment and their findings. Part 2 discusses recommendations and next steps.

## Part I: Assessment Components & Findings

### Interviews of OPA Staff About the Complaint Process

The project team interviewed OPA staff regarding methods of and communication with complainants throughout the complaint process. All interviewees were asked the same set of twelve questions (see Appendix I).<sup>1</sup> Based on the interviews, the project team identified the following themes.

1. Communication from OPA is strongest and most frequent during the intake process.
2. After intake and before investigation findings are issued, there is little communication from OPA. Complainants often reach out during that time for information on the status of their complaint.
3. Feedback from complainants is often negative and related to the outcome of their case.
4. Many complainants are seeking immediate solutions or to just be heard.
5. Complainants frequently have misconceptions of or are misinformed about what OPA does.

### Evaluation of OPA's Correspondence with Complainants

Three OPA staff members reviewed eight different form letters OPA sends complainants at various points throughout the complaint process. Staff evaluated the correspondence specifically based on word choice, clarity of message, tone, informativeness, grammar, formatting, and accuracy.<sup>2</sup> A second review of the same letters—except this time focused on equity criteria (see Appendix II)—was conducted by representatives from OPA, the Community Police Commission, the Office of Inspector General, the King County Office of Law Enforcement Oversight, and the Office for Civil Rights. The project team identified the following themes based on those reviews.

1. Information presented across form letters is not consistent or standardized.
2. Tone across form letters is inconsistent and can range from formal to impersonal to wonky.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewees included 3 administrative staff, 2 community engagement specialists, 3 civilian supervisors, and 9 sworn investigators.

<sup>2</sup> Staff assessed the following form letters: complaint form; complaint receipt; mediation outreach; investigation classification; supervisor action classification; 30-day investigation update; closing – case investigation outcome; closing – complaint not investigated.

3. Language is not consistently accessible across form letters due to jargon and undefined terms.

## Evaluation of Peer Agencies' Correspondence with Complainants

OPA reached out to five police accountability agencies across the United States and requested copies of the form letters they send to complainants. Agencies from Austin, Los Angeles, and New Orleans responded and sent samples. The table below summarizes the correspondence those agencies shared.

Agency	Correspondence
Los Angeles Police Department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Contact Letter:</b> Sent after complaint submitted</li> <li>• <b>Classification:</b> Sent after complaint classified</li> <li>• <b>5-Month Letter:</b> Sent 5 months after complaint received; investigation update</li> </ul>
Austin Office of Police Oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Notice of Complaint Submission – Online Receipt:</b> Sent after complaint submitted online</li> <li>• <b>Notice of Investigation:</b> Sent after complaint classified for investigation; identifies a point of contact</li> <li>• <b>Request for Contact:</b> Sent if complainant has not made contact since complaint submission; urges contact to continue complaint process</li> <li>• <b>No Violation Letter:</b> Sent to close the complaint when review of evidence determines no administrative policy violation</li> <li>• <b>Pre-Closeout Form Email &amp; Phone Script:</b> Explains options to provide investigation results through formal closeout meeting or closeout letter</li> <li>• <b>Closing Letter:</b> Closes case and provides final disposition/discipline</li> </ul>
New Orleans Office of Independent Police Monitor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Complainant Letter:</b> Sent after complainant makes contact; explains that office does not investigate but reviews police department investigations</li> <li>• <b>Close Out Letter to Complainant:</b> Closes out case</li> </ul>

The OPA project team identified the following themes based on a review of documents shared by the three police accountability agencies.

1. Agencies use templates with standardized content and placeholders for case-specific information.
2. Letters are short and to the point.
3. Tone is formal, professional, and direct.
4. Agencies close written communications with a specific person's name and contact information.
5. Austin offers an in-person meeting to discuss investigation findings.

## Interviews of Past Complainants About the Complaint Process

The OPA project team conducted six phone interviews in May 2020 with people who had filed a complaint that was subsequently classified as Supervisor Action or Investigation.<sup>3</sup> After analyzing the information collected in the interviews, the team identified the following themes.

1. The complaint process was easy and a positive experience; however, satisfaction correlated to whether the complainant's allegations resulted in a sustained finding.
2. Verbal communication with OPA staff was responsive, professional, and clear; phone calls were impactful and valued.
3. Phone calls from SPD supervisors (via the Supervisor Action process) helped complainants understand the outcome, feel heard, and have a better view of SPD.
4. OPA's written communications were generally clear and understandable.
5. Communication between when a complaint was classified and an investigation was completed was too sparse.

## Online Survey of Past Complainants About the Complaint Process

The OPA project team created an online survey to collect feedback from past complainants on what worked well in the complaint process and what can be improved. OPA staff disseminated the survey (see Appendix III) via Survey Monkey to 477 past complainants who met specific criteria.<sup>4</sup> OPA received 108 responses, which represents a 23% response rate.<sup>5</sup> Staff coded the results and identified the following overarching themes (see Appendix IV for additional survey findings).

1. Email and phone calls were the most valued communication methods.
2. Email correspondence, phone calls, and the online complaint tracker need the most improvement.
3. People do not understand the complaint process.
4. People are unsatisfied with the amount of communication they received during the pendency of an investigation.

## Part II: Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on the five components of the assessment and their findings, the OPA project team recommends the following next steps.

1. Rewrite all written correspondence/form letters
  - o Ensure process information, language, and tone are consistent

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<sup>3</sup> Two were classified as Investigation (one contained a sustained finding, one did not); four were Supervisor Actions.

<sup>4</sup> Survey participants were determined based on the following criteria: not a Seattle Police Department employee; filed a complaint between January 1, 2018, and April 30, 2020; complaint was classified for anything other than Contact Log; complaint is now closed; have an email address on file. Those who completed the survey could opt into a raffle to win one of eight \$25 Target gift cards.

<sup>5</sup> The survey was open between February 25, 2021, and March 8, 2021. 54% of respondents were adults age 35-54; 49% of respondents identified as men and 46% as women; 65% identified as white and 45% as a race other than white.

- Create templates that include consistent placement of case numbers, appropriate salutations, and complaint navigator (see explanation below) contact information (for cases classified for investigation)
  - Limit jargon/insider language, acronyms, and/or define terms
  - Provide realistic information about the potential timeline of the complaint
  - Limit personalization/stick to standardized language
2. Create and integrate visuals into form letters to help inform complainants about the process
  3. Increase touchpoints throughout the investigation process
    - Hire a complaint navigator whose primary function is to assist complainants with cases classified for investigation. The complaint navigator will contact complainants at specific intervals via phone to provide case updates.
    - Alternatively, utilize automated communication technology to provide complainants with case updates at specific intervals.
  4. Assess and revamp the complaint tracker to increase usability and functionality.

## Appendix I: OPA Staff Interview Questions

1. At what stage(s) of the complaint-handling process do you communicate with the complainant?
2. What methods do you use to communicate with complainants? How do you select the best method?
3. How do you know if your communication is successful?
4. What type of feedback have you received from complainants regarding their feelings about the overall complaint-handling experience and/or any single communication they've received?
5. Is your communication with complainants standardized or adaptable?
6. What should be improved and/or changed about the complaint-handling process?
7. How familiar are complainants with the OPA process when you communicate with them?
8. What information do complainants most frequently want to know or receive from OPA?
9. How do you determine when a complainant is in crisis?
10. How often do you interact with complainants in crisis?
11. What communication tools do you use when interacting with complainants in crisis?
12. What is a patrol sergeant's role in taking complaints from the public?

## Appendix II: Form Letter Evaluation Equity Criteria

1. Language Accessibility
  - a. Can this information be understood by a variety of individuals? Is jargon defined? Are hyperlinks useful?
  - b. Is information clear and concise? Is there any unnecessary information?
  - c. Is text displayed in a way that is easy to follow? For example, paragraph vs. bulleting.
  - d. Could this information be easily and consistently distributed by other methods? In-person, phone, web, varying languages?
2. Tone & Cultural Sensitivity
  - a. Are understanding and empathy expressed?
  - b. Are salutations appropriate?
3. Intended Aim/Unintended Consequences
  - a. Does the information compel the public to utilize and trust in OPA services? Is system accountability expressed?
  - b. What types of unintended consequences could result based on the information presented? What ways can these be minimized?
4. Clarity of Accommodations
  - a. Is it clear to the public that, if they require additional assistance with any part of the complaint process, OPA can provide accommodations?

# Appendix III: Online Survey of Past Complainants

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Introduction

The Seattle Office of Police Accountability (OPA) is conducting a review of our complaint process. We are seeking feedback from past complainants on what worked well and what can be improved. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary and open to invitees only- we want to hear from recent past complainants.

To show our appreciation for your time, each completed survey will be entered into a raffle to win one of several \$25 Target gift cards. If you would like to be entered into the raffle, you must include your name and email address and click 'Submit' at the end of the survey. Only one entry is allowed per participant.

Survey results will be reported in aggregate; no individual identifying information will be shared publicly. Although you are welcome to remain anonymous, you won't be eligible for the raffle, as we need a name and email address to issue the gift cards.

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Overall Experience

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

OK

\* 1. I was satisfied with my experience filing a complaint with the Office of Police Accountability.

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree | <input type="radio"/> Disagree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree          | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |

\* 2. My concerns were adequately understood by the Office of Police Accountability.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree             | <input type="radio"/> Disagree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree                      | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree |   |

\* 3. I was treated with respect by Office of Police Accountability staff throughout the process.

- Strongly agree
  Disagree  
 Agree
  Strongly disagree  
 Neither agree nor disagree

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Complaint Process & Communication

\* 4. How satisfied were you with each of the following OPA communication methods or tools?

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	N/A
Online Complaint Tracker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email correspondence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Phone calls	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Postal (mail) correspondence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Complaint submission form	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In-person interactions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 5. Which communication tool or method was most valuable to you? Choose up to three.

- Email correspondence  
 Phone calls  
 Postal correspondence  
 Online complaint tracker  
 In-person interaction  
 None  
 Other (please specify)

6. If you were dissatisfied with any of the communication methods above, please tell us both why and how we can make it better in the future.

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Complaint Process & Communication (continued)

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

OK

\* 7. Overall, I was satisfied with OPA's communication with me throughout the process.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree             | <input type="radio"/> Disagree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree                      | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree |   |

\* 8. I would be able explain to a friend how OPA's complaint process works.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree             | <input type="radio"/> Disagree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree                      | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree |   |

\* 9. I knew what to expect throughout the complaint process. Next steps and timelines were clearly communicated to me.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Strongly agree             | <input type="radio"/> Disagree          |
| <input type="radio"/> Agree                      | <input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree |
| <input type="radio"/> Neither agree nor disagree |   |

\* 10. I understood how my complaint was going to be handled.

- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

\* 11. I understood the outcome of my complaint.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

## Complaint Classification

\* 12. How was/were your complaint(s) classified?

- Supervisor Action
- Investigation
- Mediation
- I don't remember/I don't know

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Outcome and Feelings

\* 13. How satisfied were you with the outcome of your complaint?

- Very satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Satisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

\* 14. Did your confidence in the Seattle Police Department change after going through the complaint process?

- My confidence greatly increased
- My confidence increased
- No change/stayed the same
- My confidence decreased
- My confidence greatly decreased

Comments (anything you want to share about your answer):

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Comments

\* 15. What were some of the positive aspects of working with OPA on your complaint? What made those experiences positive for you? You can also write 'no comments' or 'decline to answer' if you have no feedback.

\* 16. What can OPA do to improve the complaint process? A response is required for this question. You can also write 'no comments' or 'decline to answer' if you have no suggestions.

## Complainant Experience Survey

### About You

We have a few demographic questions we would like to ask you.

\* 17. What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

18. Gender: How do you identify?

- Man
- Non-binary
- Woman
- Prefer to self-describe, below

Self-describe:

19. What is your ethnicity? (Please select all that apply.)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- White / Caucasian
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

## Complainant Experience Survey

### Enter to Win a Gift Card

If you would like to enter a drawing to win a \$25 Target gift card, please enter your name and email address below. If not interested, please leave blank.

OK

20. Your Name (First Last)

21. Email Address

## OPA News

22. If OPA were to create a quarterly community e-newsletter, would you be interested in receiving it?

Yes

No

If yes, please provide a preferred email address:

## Complainant Experience Survey

Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to respond. Your feedback is valuable to us.  
If you have entered to win a gift card, we will reach out to winners when the survey closes.

OK

## Appendix IV: Additional Survey Findings

### Overall Experience

- 67% were not satisfied with their overall experience
- 73% were not satisfied with the outcome of their complaint
- 61% did not feel their concerns were adequately understood by OPA
- 44% felt they were treated with respect by OPA staff, while 19% did not have a strong opinion and 37% felt they were not treated with respect

### Communications

- 60% were not satisfied with OPA's communication throughout the process
- Email and phone calls were the most valued communication methods
- When asked what parts of the OPA process worked well, respondents highlighted interactions with OPA staff, who they found to be respectful, polite, and patient. They also felt heard and that their complaint was validated.
- Respondents most dissatisfied with email correspondence, phone calls, and the online complaint tracker
- Respondents were most satisfied with the complaint submission form

### Understanding

- 41% of respondents said they would be able to explain the process to a friend
- 59% did not know what to expect throughout the complaint process
- 59% did not know how their complaint was going to be handled
- 53% did not understand the outcome of their complaint

### Supervisor Action

- 43% of those whose complaints were classified as Supervisor Action received a call from an SPD supervisor
- Of those who received a call, 56% felt it was valuable, even if they didn't agree with what the supervisor said

### Investigation

- 70% said they did not receive an offer to explain the outcome of the investigation
- 63% were not satisfied with the amount of communication received during the investigation

### Outcome

- 73% were dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint; 54% were extremely dissatisfied
- 69% said confidence in SPD diminished after going through the complaint process