



Seattle Office of
Inspector General

Review of SPD Professionalism Policy Disciplinary Trends

August 21, 2025

Objective and Scope

In 2024, the Community Police Commission (CPC) requested that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) review several aspects of the Seattle Police Department (SPD) professionalism policy, including how and when officers are disciplined for unprofessional conduct and what types of behaviors incur discipline.

OIG conducted this review to provide understanding of how SPD applies its professionalism policy and to identify trends in unprofessional behaviors. This review also follows up on a prior OIG recommendation for the Department to implement a peer intervention program.

This review looks at a subset of data from a recent OIG Discipline audit¹, specifically the population of sustained professionalism policy violations with findings between September 2, 2020, and June 13, 2024.

Executive Summary

The SPD professionalism policy applies broadly to officer behaviors that can undermine public trust in the Department. Its application ranges from instances of minor rudeness to potentially criminal misconduct. OIG reviewed 119 sustained professionalism allegations stemming from 101 OPA cases and found that the most common behavior observed was antagonism or disrespect toward community members. OIG also found the use of profanity to be a common contributing factor in findings of unprofessional behavior.

Professionalism allegations sustained on their own largely resulted in reprimands, with only a few resulting in suspension. However, because the most severe instances of unprofessional behavior were generally sustained in conjunction with other allegations, this review is limited in the analysis of disciplinary outcomes solely related to unprofessional conduct.

Lastly, this review found that while SPD conducted department-wide training for Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE), a peer-intervention program, the program was never fully implemented. This review recommends that SPD revisit the program and seek full implementation to the extent practicable.

¹ [Follow-Up Audit of Disciplinary Determinations for SPD Sworn Personnel \(2024\)](#)

SPD Professionalism Policy

The SPD professionalism policy describes a category of behaviors that, if violated, have the potential to undermine public trust in the Department:

Policy 5.001 – Standards and Duties POL – 10. Employees Will Strive to be Professional
Regardless of duty status, employees may not engage in behavior that undermines public trust in the Department, the officer, or other officers. Employees will avoid unnecessary escalation of events even if those events do not end in reportable uses of force.

Any time employees represent the Department or identify themselves as police officers or Department employees, they will not use profanity directed as an insult or any language that is derogatory, contemptuous, or disrespectful toward any person.

Employees on duty or in uniform will not publicly ridicule:

- *The Department or its policies*
- *Other Department employees*
- *Other law enforcement agencies*
- *The criminal justice system or police profession*

This applies where such expression is defamatory, obscene, undermines the effectiveness of the Department, interferes with the maintenance of discipline, or is made with reckless regard for the truth.

Professionalism Policy is Applied in Multiple Ways

During this period, SPD sustained 119 allegations of unprofessionalism against 104 different officers.² With the exception of 2021, less than 20% of complaints annually have been sustained over the years relevant to this review.³

Year	Sustained %
2020	16%
2021	26%
2022	14%
2023	17%
2024	19%

Figure 1: Percentage of professionalism allegations sustained, by year investigation was completed.

2 Within this review, an allegation (or violation) refers to a single named employee who sustained a professionalism policy violation; that named employee may also have sustained other policy violations in the same investigation.

3 Low-severity behaviors such as rudeness may be appropriately addressed through Supervisor Actions and Training Referrals. Those non-disciplinary outcomes are not included in this review.

Of the allegations included in this review, 58 were sustained alongside at least one other allegation and 61 sustained allegations were solely matters of professionalism. Across all 119 allegations, OIG observed three general applications of the professionalism policy:

- Behaviors specifically outlined in the professionalism policy, including use of profanity, public ridicule, and unnecessary escalation.
- Serious misconduct from which the professionalism policy is logically also violated. Examples include potential criminal activity and dishonesty.
- Behaviors detrimental to the department, but not fully described under other specific policy. Examples include sleeping on duty or giving highly inappropriate advice to a person whom officers were interacting with.

Among the 104 officers who had a sustained professionalism violation within our scope, 12 received at least one other sustained professionalism violation within the same approximately four-year scope.⁴ The proportion of officers with multiple sustained professionalism violations in their SPD employment is potentially greater, however OIG did not account for career allegations beyond the scope of this review.

Methodology: Categorizing and Coding Unprofessional Behaviors

Before the Chief makes a disciplinary determination, the Office of Police Accountability (OPA) Director issues a Director's Certification Memo (DCM), which details evidence and reasoning supporting their recommended finding for each allegation. OIG reviewed the DCM for each of the 119 sustained professionalism allegations and categorized unprofessional behaviors into one of seven behavior types; antagonistic, disrespectful, neglect of duties, public ridicule, use of position, drugs/alcohol, and miscellaneous.⁵

These behavior types were identified by OIG based on SPD policy language and patterns observed in OPA's DCMs. While auditors used their professional judgement in coding and categorization of cases, these behavior types are intended only as a qualitative tool for this review and are not otherwise defined in SPD or OPA policy.

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- 4 OIG evaluated the issue of progressive discipline for re-occurring misconduct in the [Audit of Disciplinary System for SPD Sworn Personnel \(2021\)](#). OIG found the Department generally took prior discipline of an officer into account when appropriate, but that misconduct happening in close succession with another instance of misconduct may not be accounted for under due process.
- 5 This review categorizes "miscellaneous" for situations that do not conform to the other behavior categories and are generally not common enough to evaluate on their own. Examples include using a department mailing address for personal reasons, misrepresenting working hours, and attempting to solicit a sex worker.

Antagonism and Disrespect are the Most Common Unprofessional Behaviors

OIG found that just over half of unprofessionalism violations fell within the “antagonistic” and “disrespectful” categories. When taken together, these two classifications generally reflect a set of cases where officers were unprofessional in communicating with the public. Antagonistic behavior may be thought of as generally verbal escalation or even bullying, while disrespectful behavior is generally lower-level discounting or demeaning comments made by an officer.

Sustained Allegations by Behavior Type

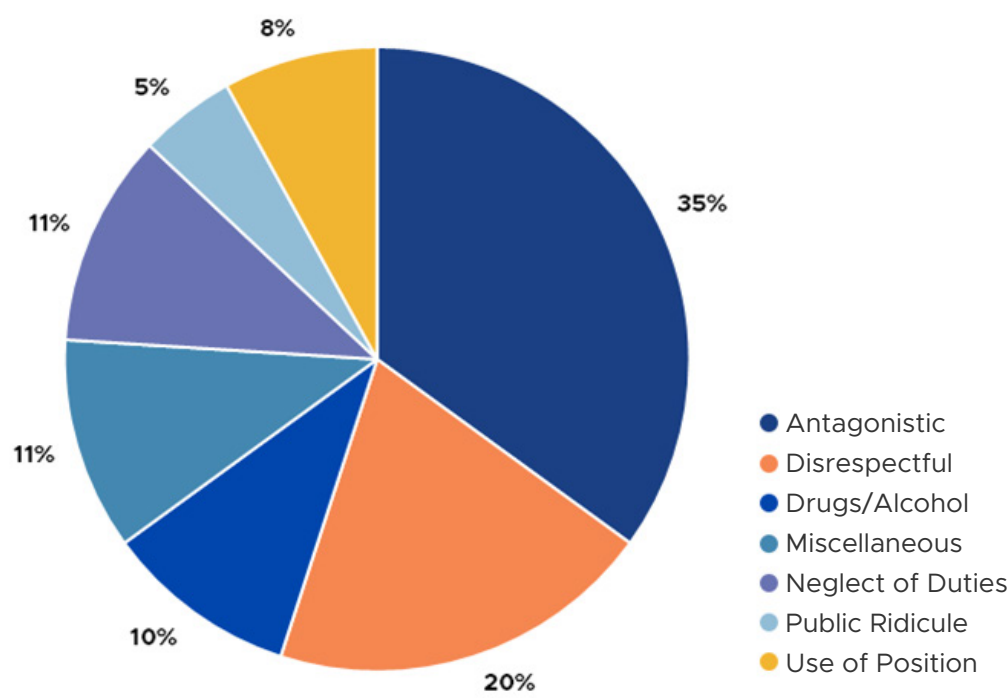


Figure 2: Sustained professionalism allegations broken down by behavior type.

Community Members are Subject to Unprofessionalism Most Often

Sustained professionalism violations involved behaviors directed at community members almost twice as often as suspects. Community members may be individuals or groups such as protesters.⁶ These violations included behaviors directed at community members or those which referred to them indirectly; for instance, situations where an officer made inappropriate comments about a community member over SPD radio.

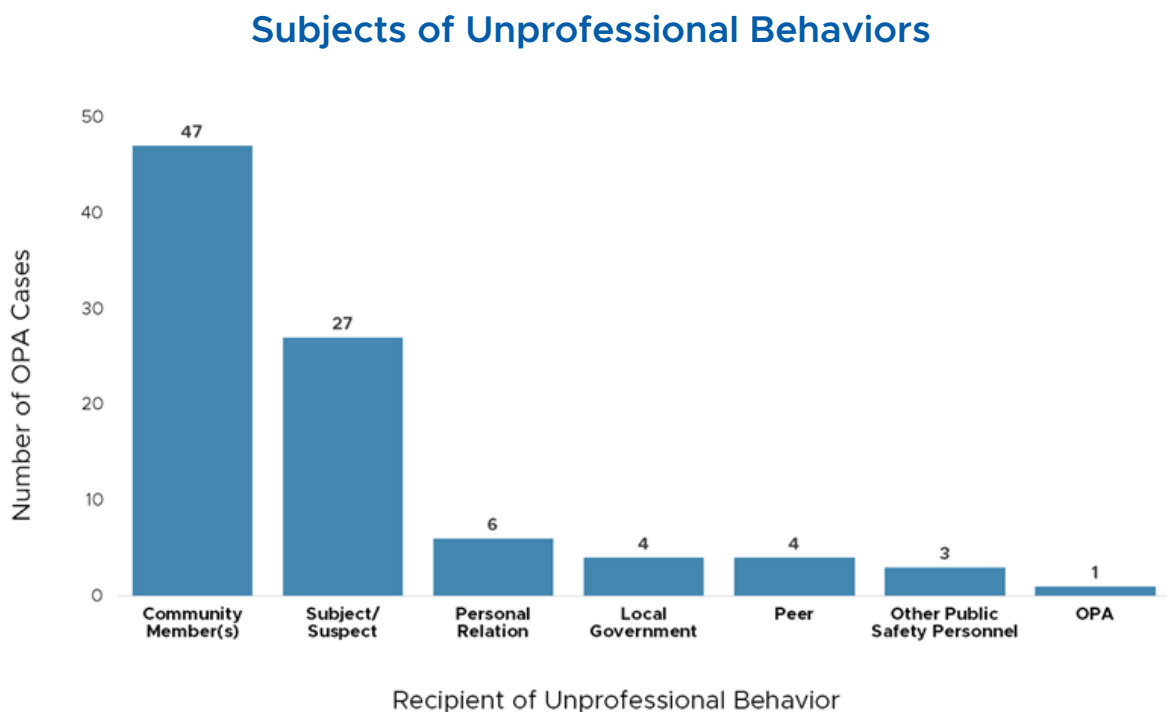


Figure 3: The number of OPA cases associated with different subjects of unprofessional behavior.⁷

Profanity was a factor in nearly one third of professionalism violations, and community members were more likely to be on the receiving end of profanity than any other group. OPA cited profanity in DCMs for 34 of 119 sustained allegations, mostly falling within the “antagonistic” behavior category. Within the “antagonistic” category itself, profanity was cited 29 times (71%). This includes 18 cases where profane language appeared to be the main or major contributing factor for a sustained professionalism allegation. SPD training materials emphasize the ineffectiveness of using profanity as a de-escalation tactic and cite research that profanity can unnecessarily escalate situations, damage the legitimacy of law enforcement, and increase perception that use of force is excessive.

6 For this review, a group of protesters is counted as a single event. Protesters were the subject of unprofessional behavior seven times during the review period.

7 OIG categorized nine of 101 OPA cases as having no identifiable recipient of unprofessional behavior.

Most Sustained Professionalism Allegations Classified as "Disrespectful" Occured in 2020-2021



Figure 4: Disrespectful behaviors made up a greater share of sustained professionalism allegations in 2020 and 2021.

Of 25 sustained professionalism allegations categorized as “disrespectful”, 22 occurred in 2020-2021. These included a broad range of interactions where an SPD officer was rude, condescending, sarcastic, made derogatory references, or was deemed not to have taken victim or community member concerns seriously. For example, in one case, an officer told a community member to “shut up” when they asked the officer for a business card. Another incident involved an officer behaving impatiently and condescendingly towards a domestic violence assault victim. While few of these behaviors happened in direct response to protests in 2020 and 2021, OIG notes that those years represented a significant period of contention between SPD officers and members of the public.

A Quarter of Behaviors Found Unprofessional Occurred Off-Duty

Sustained Allegations by Setting

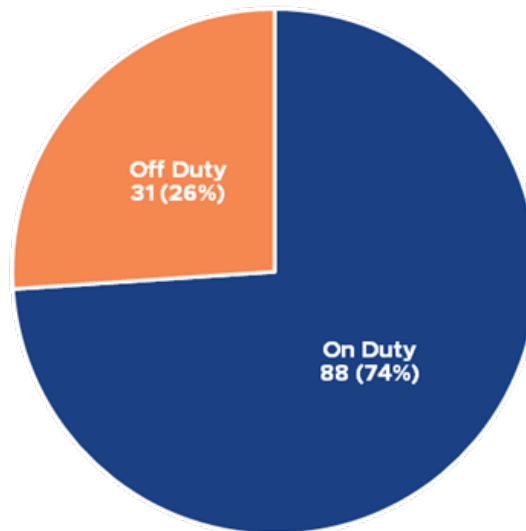


Figure 5: Three quarters of sustained professionalism allegations occurred during an officer's normal course of duties.

On Duty

Almost three quarters of all sustained professionalism allegations occurred while on-duty (88). Of those, another three quarters involved antagonistic or disrespectful behaviors (64). The next most common type of behavior was "neglect of duties" (13). These cases involved a failure to perform duties or to appear for duty or trainings and most frequently referred to an officer's delayed response to a priority call for service.

Off Duty

There were 31 cases involving sustained professionalism allegations for off-duty officers. Drug and alcohol offenses were the most common off-duty violations, occurring 12 times. These were most often instances of unruly behavior and citations for driving under the influence (DUI). Four of these instances resulted in termination of employment or would have if the officer had not resigned or retired first.

Sustained Allegations by Behavior Type While Off Duty

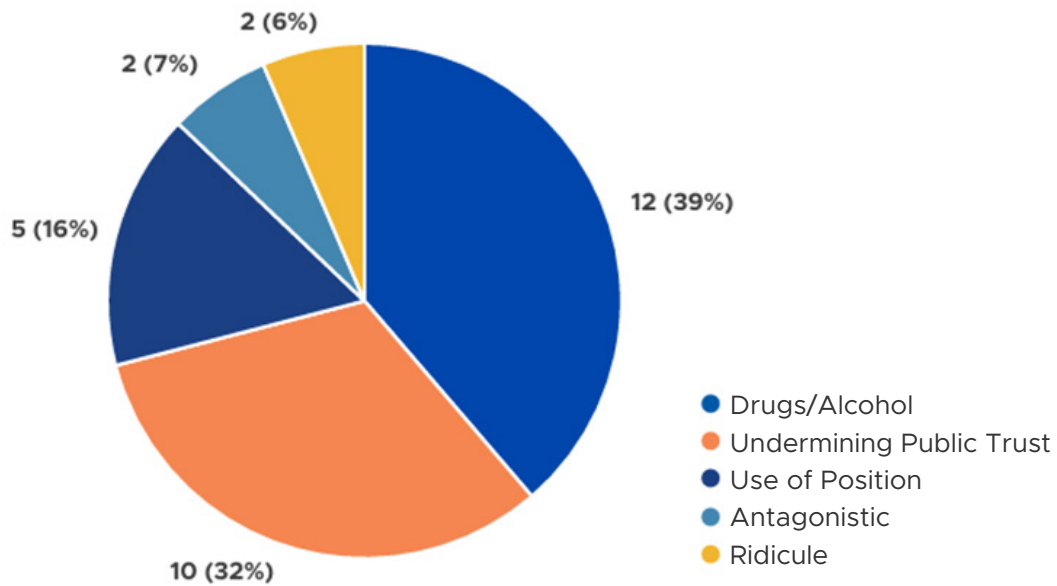


Figure 6: Sustained professionalism allegations by behavior type for violation.

Unprofessionalism Results in Mostly Low-Level Discipline When Isolated

Levels of discipline imposed by the Chief are based on the totality of sustained allegations against an officer in any given case. As such, it is not possible to parse the impact of different sustained allegations on a given disciplinary action when multiple sustained violations are aggregated.

For example, among all cases with a sustained allegation of unprofessionalism, ten resulted in terminations and an additional four cases would have resulted in termination had the officer not retired, resigned, or been terminated in a separate disciplinary action. While the actions of these officers were determined to be unprofessional, they involved serious co-occurring allegations such as illegal acts or dishonesty for which the disciplinary outcomes would have likely been the same regardless of if the professionalism policy had been applied.

Professionalism was the only sustained allegation in approximately half (61) of cases in this review. 59 of these cases resulted in discipline, which ranged from oral or written reprimands (87% of cases) to suspension without pay (10%). In the other two cases, the employees either resigned or retired prior to discipline being imposed.

Disciplinary Outcome of Cases with Professionalism as the Only Sustained Allegation

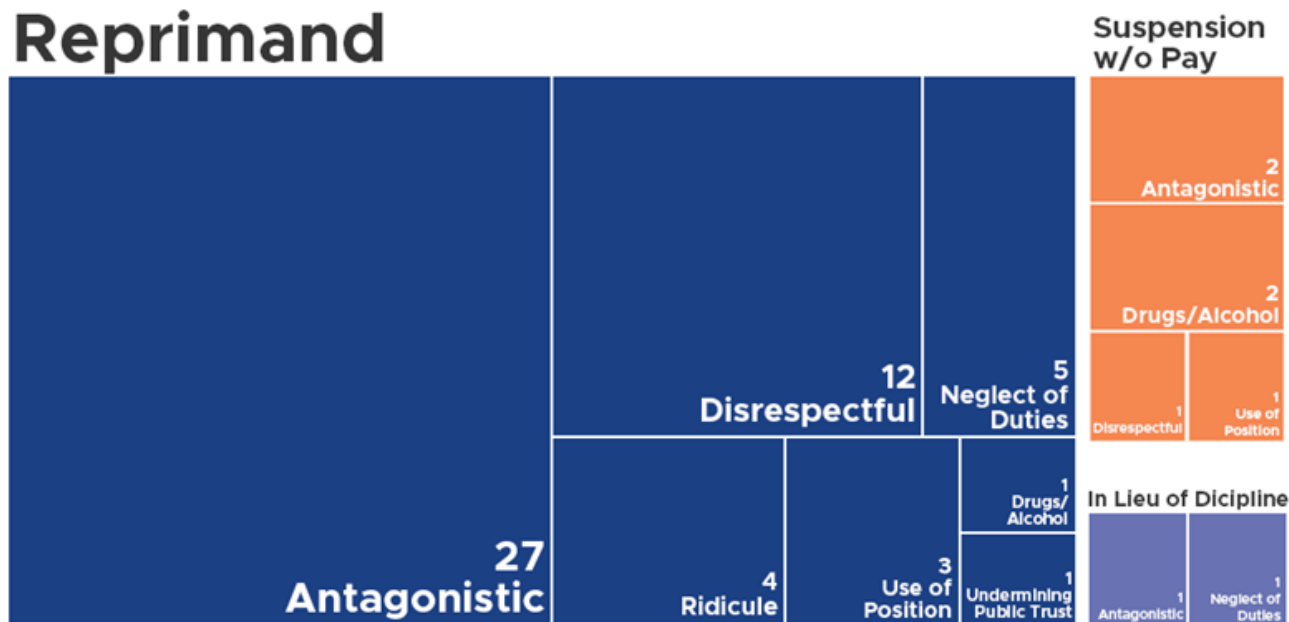


Figure 7: Of cases with only sustained professionalism allegations, 87% resulted in reprimands.

Role of Peer Intervention

In 2018, OIG wrote a memo to SPD leadership recommending the development of a peer-intervention program. The memo noted that a peer intervention program can benefit the community by reducing the likelihood that law enforcement officers will react inappropriately or unprofessionally in a high stress or heated situation. Such a program could also benefit officers and the SPD by acknowledging the realities of human nature in a high stress or frustrating encounter, affording officers the training and tools to step in and assist each other in de-escalation and avoidance of unprofessional behavior or misconduct.⁸

In 2021, SPD began implementing a peer review program known as Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE). ABLE is a program developed by the Center for Innovations in Community Safety at Georgetown Law with the goal “to prepare officers to successfully intervene to prevent harm and to create a law enforcement culture that supports peer intervention.”

Full implementation of the ABLE program involves expansive policy regarding an officers’ duty to intervene, non-retaliation policy, implementation of a physical and mental wellness program, and an initial 8-hour departmentwide training with annual refresher trainings.⁹

SPD has implemented some, but not all components of ABLE. The Department has a wellness program and a non-retaliation policy. Throughout 2021, SPD required all personnel to undergo the 8-hour ABLE

⁸ <https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/OIG/Special/PeerInterventionMemo092618.pdf>

⁹ The ABLE model policy is available at: <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/cics/able/resource-hub/>

training, however the Department does not conduct annual refresher trainings.¹⁰ Instead, the Education and Training Unit indicated that ABLE strategies have been incorporated into components of training. SPD has not adopted the ABLE model policy, but the department's policy does expand expectations for officer intervention beyond state law:¹¹

SPD Policy 5.002(6)

[...] Employees who witness or learn of a violation of public trust or an allegation of a violation of public trust will take action to prevent aggravation of the incident or loss of evidence that could prove or disprove the allegation. Any employee who observes another employee engaged in dangerous or criminal conduct or abuse will take reasonable action to intervene.

The ABLE model policy also provides for mitigation of discipline if an officer accepts peer-intervention, and consideration of successful peer intervention in evaluations and promotions. These components are not currently included in SPD policy. OIG notes that some elements of the ABLE model policy may be difficult to implement due to collective bargaining, but King County Sheriff's Office provides one example of substantial adoption of the model policy.¹²

Department personnel expressed uncertainty over the current status of ABLE program and identified that many of the leadership and trainers who implemented the program in 2021 are no longer with SPD. OIG is renewing the 2018 recommendation and asking that the Department revisit its participation in the ABLE program to seek fuller implementation as one means to help peer officers recognize, interrupt, and coach their peers on problematic behaviors before they escalate into conduct that may be harmful to public trust or officer wellness.

Recommendation

Fully Implement the ABLE Program

SPD should fully implement the ABLE program to the extent practicable given existing labor agreements. Full implementation should address issues of disrespectful or antagonistic behaviors by officers through policy and ongoing training.

Non-Audit Statement: This review was not conducted under Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards (GAGAS); however, OIG has followed GAGAS standards regarding the sufficiency and appropriateness of evidence.

¹⁰ The Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission offers new recruits an optional class on duty to intervene.

¹¹ RCW 10.93.190 applies a duty to intervene to instances of excessive force.

¹² [KCSO General Order 3.09.000 – ABLE Program](#)



Appendix A Management Response to Recommendations in OIG Review of SPD Professionalism Policy Disciplinary Trends

OIG has provided a draft report for SPD’s review and response. Below are the recommendations from that report, along with specific responses we’re asking SPD to provide within 10 calendar days, unless otherwise agreed. SPD’s responses will be published as an appendix in our report alongside any other written response the Department wishes to make to the audit.

If SPD intends not to concur with a recommendation or otherwise finds a recommendation could be modified for clarity, please notify OIG as soon as possible so that we may work with the Department to reconcile the issue.

Recommendation	Fully Implement the ABLE Program
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Management Response

☒ Concur ☐ Do Not Concur

SPD agrees that there is no place for unprofessionalism, unwarranted profanity/profanity directed at individuals, rudeness, and any other expressive behaviors that diminish others and reflect poorly on the profession and the agency, whether on or off duty. SPD is deeply mindful of the harm that can result, not the least of which is delegitimization of not only that employee, but of all around them who fail to intervene. At the same time, the department also recognizes that unprofessional behavior, in many instances, is less a conscious in-the-moment action born of malice or disrespect but more significantly, a direct outward manifestation of the physiological, psychological, and emotional strain that we know many in our department, as in first responder agencies nationwide, experience. This is particularly true with respect to cases involving substance abuse, which, while wholly outside of policy and certainly requiring of administrative consequence, SPD views less through the lens of unprofessional conduct and more through the lens of employee wellness.

SPD believes that its responsibilities to both its employees and the community must address not only unprofessional behavior when it occurs but also root causal factors when they can be discerned. SPD wholly supports integrating ABLE training into its curriculum, but when budget and capacity enable SPD to do so responsibly and with continuity – an ongoing challenge. That said, over the past few years SPD has taken several steps to bring greater awareness to employees and supervisors as to how to recognize, and mitigate against, the impact of profession stress, and is committed to continuing and expanding these efforts. Examples include:

- The onboarding of Dr. Emily Hu, our in-house clinical psychologist who was hired in 2023 following a years-long effort to secure the position to build out the Employee Support Services Bureau, which includes in-house and referral services available to any employee, family

support services, and to lead and coordinate SPD's comprehensive and expanding programs for employee wellness and support.

- SPD has now completed the buildout and testing of the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PrISM), which will replace the outdated and demonstrably ineffective Early Intervention System, has presented it to both SPOG and SPMA, and expects to move forward with development of policy and training. A non-disciplinary tool, PrISM flips the focus of traditional EIS models by providing supervisors with early insight into indicators of strain that are algorithmically predictive of future adverse outcomes, rather than focusing on outcomes themselves (which, if out of policy, are required to be addressed through OPA). By giving supervisors this insight, PrISM seeks to provide supervisors with recommendation and tools to mitigate, to the extent they can, those indicators of strain. SPD looks forward to briefing the OIG soon on this program.

Additionally, since the roll-out of Before the Badge training in 2023, SPD has been providing new recruits with training that focuses on the reputational harm that comes with unprofessional behavior, the impact of stress on officer performance, how unprofessional behavior can play out in both the court of public opinion and the court of law, and the further ramifications on an officer's career that may follow. In 2024, SPD began implementing this training in its training for supervisors and field training officers and, coming this Fall, command training. SPD believes that this training provides a natural companion to, and foundation for, the ABLE program when SPD is able to implement.

Estimated Date of Implementation: Undetermined, as dependent on budget and capacity.

Proposed Implementation Plan: Continue with current work in the interim.