

Coalition will serve as a watchdog to watchdogs

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A coalition of community groups to act as a watchdog over the implementation of the county's civilian review board officially announced its formation yesterday.

The new organization's leaders, most of whom are lawyers, said they were not interested in serving on the review board. Their major concern, they said, was that the new panel not lose power in the process of being implemented.

"We're basically an alliance of groups formed when we were alerted by people around the state who have worked with civilian review boards," said Michael Crowley, a San Diego lawyer involved in civil liberties issues.

Crowley said that after some review boards have been established, "there was a complacency that set in that the problem was going to be solved. But, in fact, the board became ineffectual.

"This group is being formed to make sure there's proper implementation and ...to make sure there's a strong director and a widely diversified board."

The alliance, called Citizens for Law Enforcement Accountability and Review (CLEAR), also will try to make sure the new panel is adequately staffed and funded, Crowley said.

The county has set aside up to \$350,000 to start up the board, and has estimated it will cost \$320,000 each year to operate it. Critics of the review board have said those figures are underestimated.

Crowley conceded yesterday that it might cost more than the county has allotted to operate an effective panel, but added, "It's the old story. Pay now or pay later."

He contends that having a strong review board will cut down on the costly civil judgments that have been rendered recently in cases where sheriff's deputies have been accused of brutality.

In the largest judgment, Vista resident Jim Butler was awarded \$1.2 million after a jury determined he was battered by deputies during an arrest, and then again at the Vista Jail.

Butler is now a member of CLEAR and said yesterday that he is also forming a support group for victims of police brutality.

It was reports of brutality by deputies in the jails and in the field that caused county supervisors to place a civilian review board measure on the November ballot. Voters approved the measure overwhelmingly.

It authorized a charter amendment calling for a civilian review panel with subpoena and investigative powers to look into complaints of brutality by deputies and recommend discipline. The panel also has the authority to review department policies.

It is the first panel statewide formed to review a sheriff's department, and critics contend it could be tied up in the courts as various new issues are adjudicated.

The Deputy Sheriff's Association already has asked a judge to force the county to go back and negotiate with the association before implementing the review board. If deputies are successful, implementation of the board could be delayed by many months.

In a separate action, the association is attempting to sue the county to stop implementation of the review board.

Deputies contend that they are not against civilian review. At the same time, they insist the county violated their labor contract by not negotiating the wording of the review board measure with their organization.

"Our position is the same as it always has been," said Randy Dibb, president of the DSA. "The county has to abide by their own laws. If they fail to comply at any time for any reason, we're going to challenge them on it. If a person feels their rights are violated, they take action. And this is the same kind of thing."

Betty Wheeler, of the ACLU, said she was confident the deputies' dispute would remain a separate issue that would not affect the timely implementation of the review board.

San Diego attorney Tom Adler, a member of CLEAR, said it was important that the organization not only oversee the formation of the review board, but continue to make sure the panel operates effectively.

"It's not so much establishing a board as to make sure its operated in a meaningful fashion," He said. "If it does not function in a meaningful way, then there might as well not even be a review board."

Among 13 groups that have joined the coalition are the ACLU, the American Friends Service Committee, the Earl B. Gilliam Bar Association, the Friends of Immigrant Workers, the San Diego branch of the NAACP and the San Diego Criminal Defense Bar Association.

The San Diego County Bar Association has also offered its services and resources.

Credit: Staff Writer

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