

# WA agency that will investigate police killings sets start date

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*Roger Rogoff, a former judge and prosecutor, is the first director of the new Office of Independent Investigations. The office will attempt something no other U.S. state or agency has ever tried: completely removing police from the long-held and conflict-ridden practice of investigating themselves when they kill or injure someone. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times, 2022)*

By [Mike Carter](#)

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Beginning in December, police killings in 12 Western Washington counties will no longer be investigated by police.

It will be the first test of a unique [state agency, the Office of Independent Investigations](#), established by the Legislature in 2021 with the intent of erasing the “thin blue line” that has traditionally protected police and allowed them to essentially investigate themselves in fatal officer encounters.

The first of six planned offices in the state will open Dec. 1, with investigators from the agency ready to respond to all law-enforcement-involved deaths in Thurston, Lewis, Mason, Clark, Clallam, Grays Harbor, Pacific, Jefferson, Kitsap, Skamania, Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties.

They take over from several investigative teams around the state made up of police and sheriff's detectives from agencies near but outside the jurisdiction where a killing at the hands of police occurs. Those teams were meant to guard against the conflict inherent in a police agency investigating one of its own. But police accountability advocates complain those investigative teams often have conflicts of their own.

The Legislature established the Office of Independent Investigations to take over the job and avoid these conflicts. It is the first such agency in the country.

"This is a significant milestone for our agency and the state of Washington," agency Director Roger Rogoff said last week in announcing the Dec. 1 activation of the first state team. Gov. Jay Inslee [appointed Rogoff](#) to the job in 2022.

"I arrived here two years ago when we did not have employees, infrastructure, policies or a training program," said Rogoff, a former prosecutor and Superior Court judge. "What we had was a singular mission to conduct fair, thorough, transparent and competent investigations. It has taken a lot of hard work to reach this point. I am proud of what we are building."

The agency has had to find office space, transportation, secure evidence storage, two-way radios and communication equipment, laboratory and technical equipment for sophisticated scene mapping and drone technology, and a case management system, Rogoff said. The agency budget for the 2021-23 biennium was \$26 million.

Meantime, the agency continues to hire and train investigators, both senior investigators who have homicide experience and the line investigators they will mentor, many of whom will have no law enforcement experience. Once they've passed background, psychological and polygraph tests, they will attend the [Basic Law Enforcement Academy](#) to learn about police work.

At the end, they will get limited law enforcement powers — the ability to issue subpoenas, for example — but will not be armed.

Rogoff said recruiting is going well, and the agency hopes to employ between 18 and 35 trained investigators and support personnel in or near each region, available to respond quickly to a police-involved death. "There will be some overlap," he said.

The first region will open with 22 investigators available, 14 west of the Cascades and eight on the east side. He declined to speculate when the agency will be fully operational statewide.

Rogoff acknowledged that starting in stages “is not ideal. ... This is the first step to being an independent investigation agency for the entire state.”

The agency will begin by investigating only cases involving a death but eventually will be charged with investigating any use of deadly force, whether a death resulted or not.

The formation of the Office of Independent Investigations was the most ambitious step in a series of law enforcement reforms demanded by Washington residents or passed by the state Legislature since 2018, resulting in a cascade of changes aimed at transparency, accountability and reducing deadly interactions between police and the residents — especially those of color — they’re sworn to protect and serve.

The law requires investigators to be “trained to understand the impact and effects of racism in the investigation and use of an anti-racist lens to conduct their work.”

Language passed with the measure creating the agency said the office was needed to address “an outpouring of frustration, anger, and demand for change from many members of the public over the deaths of people of color resulting from encounters with police.”