



Providence External Review Authority

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Providence External Review Authority (PERA) Statement

On the Reinstatement of Sgt. Joseph Hanley.

The reinstatement of Sergeant Joseph Hanley following his LEOBOR hearing should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the structural deficiencies in Rhode Island's police accountability framework. His return to duty, despite his admission to serious allegations of misconduct and a dissenting opinion from a high-ranking police official, reflects the deep-rooted ineffectiveness of current oversight mechanisms. Once again, we are faced with an outcome that undermines public trust and highlights the urgent need for meaningful reform.

This case stands as another example of the failure of the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights (LEOBOR). Rhode Island's LEOBOR law (one of the most comprehensive laws of its type in the country) was designed as an additional layer of due process but has in practice become a shield against accountability. Less than half of the states have adopted some type of LEOBOR protections for law enforcement officers, and none have demonstrated its necessity in an era where collective bargaining agreements already provide ample due process protections.

LEOBOR creates an unnecessary and expensive hurdle to municipal discipline. Officers already enjoy grievance procedures and access to the courts. Layering on a separate administrative process only delays justice and places financial burdens on municipalities. These hearings often take years, draining public resources and eroding the public's faith in oversight systems.

While recent amendments to LEOBOR have been enacted, it is unrealistic to expect substantive change from minor procedural tweaks. Legislators must recognize that real reform requires dismantling systems that prioritize institutional protection over public accountability.

Accountability Begins at Home: A Providence Police Problem

While LEOBOR is a substantial obstacle, it is not solely to blame. Accountability starts at the departmental level, and the issues raised in Sgt. Hanley's case reflect a broader failure within the Providence Police Department. The fact that Hanley achieved the rank of Sergeant, served in the Detective Bureau, and held supervisory responsibilities despite internal concerns about his behavior raises troubling questions.

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The LEOBOR majority panel praised Sgt. Hanley's record as "unblemished and exemplary¹." In stark contrast, Deputy Chief O'Hara described him as "prone to volatility, violence, vulgarity, untruthfulness, and lying²" and noted that Hanley "admitted to being a criminal." If these characterizations are accurate, why was he ever promoted? Where is the department's documentation of these behaviors? A person becomes "prone" to misconduct through repeated, unchecked actions—not isolated incidents. If this behavior was observed, why was it not documented and addressed?

PERA has reviewed many cases involving similarly concerning conduct, and in nearly every instance, the department has determined that the officer's actions were acceptable. This reflects a pattern of institutional denial and tolerance of misconduct. Hanley's case is not an anomaly—it is a symptom of a broader failure.

Barriers to Reform and PERA's Mandate

PERA is committed to improving policing in Providence through transparency and accountability. Our goal is not punitive; it is preventative. True accountability means identifying and correcting misconduct early to improve departmental culture and avoid recurrence.

Unfortunately, our efforts have been repeatedly obstructed. The department has failed to implement a disciplinary matrix as required by city ordinance. Our policy recommendations, developed after rigorous review by the PERA board and submitted to both the department and the Mayor's Office, have gone unanswered. In one case, PERA recommended modified discipline for a Sergeant who violated an individual's First and Fourth Amendment rights after the department issued only a verbal reprimand for his misconduct. The recommendation continues to be unanswered.

Instead of cooperation, we have encountered resistance. Most recently, the city administration reduced PERA's budget, limiting our ability to conduct hearings and fulfill our oversight responsibilities. These actions do not reflect a commitment to accountability—they are deliberate obstructions.

The reinstatement of Sergeant Hanley should be a wake-up call. Police accountability in Providence is not functioning as it should. LEOBOR must be repealed, not revised. The Providence Police Department must acknowledge and correct its internal failures. And the City must restore PERA's funding and commit to transparency and collaboration.

We are ready to do our part. But we cannot improve policing in Providence without the tools, cooperation, and political will necessary to challenge the status quo. The community deserves better—and we will continue to fight for it.

¹ City of Providence v. Sergeant Joseph Hanley LEOBOR majority decision page 34.

² City of Providence v. Sergeant Joseph Hanley LEOBOR Dissenting opinion by Major O'Hara page 59



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The Providence External Review Authority is a civilian led police oversight body for the city of Providence. It is charged with reviewing and investigating police misconduct complaints as well as reviewing and making recommendations for changes to the department's policies and procedures and implementing community outreach programs. The board is comprised of 9 civilian members appointed by the city council and the Mayor of Providence. More information can be found on our website: www.providenceri.gov/PERA. Inquiries should be directed to the Executive Director, Ferenc Karoly at pera@providenceri.gov or (401) 680-5790.