

Use of Deadly Force Investigation Audits

2025 Year-End Report



Introduction

In 2021, passage of a new state law required our Office to audit all investigations into police use of deadly force incidents. Our task has been to assess each incident since early 2020 and determine whether the incident’s independent investigation team (IIT) maintained independence, transparency, sound communication and credibility during their review of the event. Since publishing our first audit of a deadly use of force investigation in 2022, we have steadily developed and trained a dedicated team of auditors for this specialized work.

For our Office, these audits are about providing the Washington public with a clearer view into one of today’s most controversial issues: law enforcement’s use of lethal force. It is an important subject in communities across the state. About 230 deadly force investigations have begun since 2020, all of which we must be audited.

Our Office is committed to providing the public with an independent review of every one of those investigations. We conducted 33 audits in 2025, increasing our total to 88 completed cases.

This report outlines key themes identified in those 2025 audits. The most common areas of noncompliance have been largely consistent over the first three years. In part, this is because many of the investigations were completed before we started the audit program. For example, if we issued two audit reports with nearly identical recommendations, it could be because the local law enforcement agencies have not yet had an opportunity to respond to our recommendations. We anticipate publishing a report next year that focuses on our recommendations and the changes independent investigation teams have made to address them.

The most frequent compliance issue in 2025 was independent investigation teams failing to ensure that all investigators and community representatives completed conflict of interest assessments – 26 of the 33 cases reviewed did not meet this requirement. Additionally, in 24 of the 33 cases we audited this year, we found police departments did not take necessary measures to ensure officers involved in the use of deadly force could make independent statements to investigators.

We hope this report serves as a valuable resource for lawmakers, the Criminal Justice Training Commission, and the state’s independent investigation teams as they work to ensure police use of deadly force is investigated in a manner that maintains public trust and confidence.

Independent investigation teams review police use of force

Initiative 940, in part, requires investigations of police use of deadly force to be conducted by an agency completely independent of the one with the involved officer(s). Its intent was to improve their impartiality and independence by preventing people who were more likely to have a personal relationship with the involved officers from investigating the use of force.



Law enforcement agencies established regional IITs to allow investigators to respond quickly to use of deadly force incidents while keeping the involved agency out of the investigation. Washington has 19 IITs throughout the state, which are made up of command staff, detectives, and other crime scene investigators from law enforcement agencies within the given region. An IIT also includes volunteers, called community representatives, who help give the community perspective during an investigation. They are required to participate in certain processes.

Many of these teams existed in some form before recent police reform and accountability laws, including Initiative 940, and allowed law enforcement agencies to pool resources for major investigations.



In separate reports, we are evaluating each IIT's compliance with requirements that can be fulfilled outside of any particular use of force investigation. This review includes specific team-related requirements, such as the IIT's processes for selecting and training investigators and other team members. Unlike most audits, in which where we focus on past events, we are evaluating whether the IIT's current processes comply with state requirements. Our Office has published 13 of these reports.

[Click here](#) to read WAC 139-12-030, the state's independent investigation criteria.

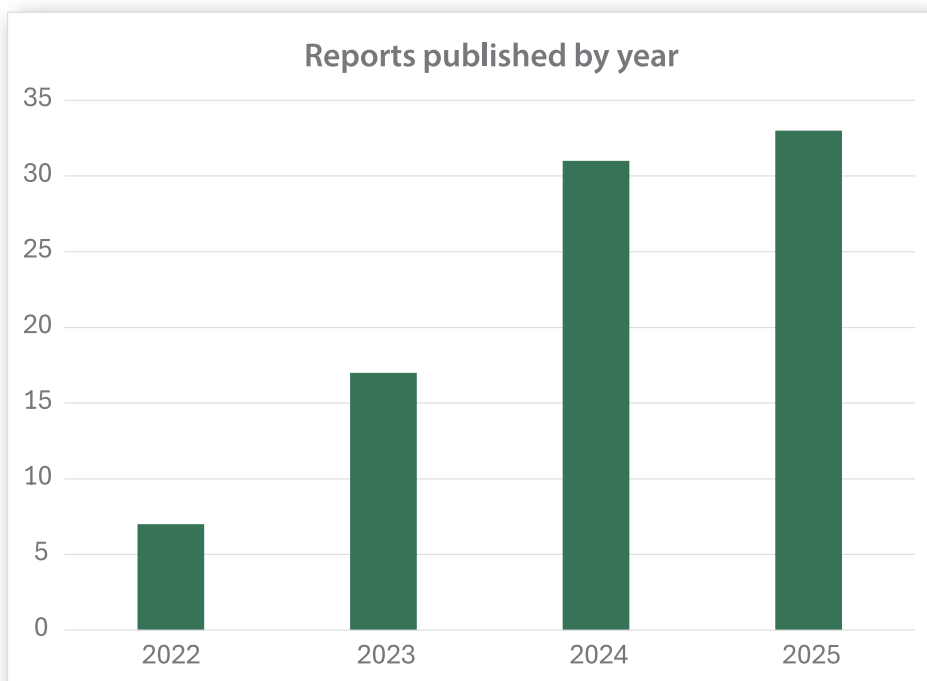
UDFI audits provide accountability and transparency

Our audits provide a clearer understanding of the work of regional IITs that respond to incidents of police use of deadly force. Our work begins after county prosecutors either decline to pursue charges, or the resulting criminal court case is fully resolved. The civilian-led state [Office of Independent Investigations](#) (OII) was created in 2021 to investigate police use of deadly force. It began conducting investigations in December 2024, and has completed three investigations, and has with four in progress. We anticipate reviewing the first of its investigations in 2026.

Steps leading to a report			
	A law enforcement officer uses deadly force, which results in death, substantial bodily harm or great bodily harm.		
	The use of force is investigated by an independent investigation team (IIT) made up of detectives and other crime scene investigators from law enforcement agencies in the region where the use of force incident occurred. Agencies involved in the deadly force incident cannot send detectives to be part of the independent investigation team.		
	The county prosecutor reviews the IIT's completed investigation.		
	The prosecutor decides whether or not to criminally charge the officer that who used deadly force. These charging decisions can depend on completion of related reviews, such as a coroner's inquest.		
	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>If the prosecutor decides not to pursue criminal charges, SAO begins review of the IIT investigation.</td> <td>Or the prosecutor may pursue criminal charges. SAO cannot begin audit work until the resulting court case, including appeals, is completed.</td> </tr> </table>	If the prosecutor decides not to pursue criminal charges, SAO begins review of the IIT investigation.	Or the prosecutor may pursue criminal charges. SAO cannot begin audit work until the resulting court case, including appeals, is completed.
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	<p>SAO works with law enforcement agencies and IIT's to compare the elements of the investigation as it was conducted to the criteria outlined in rules established by the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission. Those rules are designed to ensure investigations are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Transparent • Credible • Communicated to the public and affected people 		
	SAO issues a report that describes any rules the investigation did not follow and offers recommendations to improve compliance.		

The most common areas of noncompliance remain consistent

We reviewed local news media reporting, law enforcement agency websites and national databases, and have identified around 230 police use of deadly force investigations in Washington since January 2020 that are likely to require audits. Not all the investigations have been completed, and some are still pending review by county prosecutors review. As illustrated below, we have completed 88 audits since we started this work in mid-2022. We published 33 of those reports this year. Fifteen audits are in progress, and we requested several more case files from IITs.



Our audits have found that IITs and responding officers have regularly complied with the CJTC’s rules and best practices. They have also identified some areas of noncompliance, where documentation in case files can be improved, or where CJTC rules need to be clarified. The most common areas of noncompliance are similar to those we identified in the first two years.

1

IITs need defined processes to review investigator backgrounds for misconduct

To help improve the credibility of investigations, the WAC requires IIT investigators' work histories to be free of serious misconduct or patterns of complaints, and personal histories free of "bias or prejudice against community members that may be impacted by police use of deadly force." The CJTC's best practices for investigations require yearly reviews of investigators' backgrounds to determine if any of them have sustained misconduct allegations.

Five of the seven IITs we reviewed this year did not have distinct processes to screen their investigators for these behaviors. Many IIT commanders said they supervise the investigators on their teams, so they would be aware of any serious issues. Others said that the investigators would not be detectives within their departments if they exhibited any behavior that could be considered serious misconduct or demonstrable bias.

The two IITs that met the requirement had their member law enforcement agencies' chiefs or sheriffs review members' personnel files each year and sign an attestation confirming their investigators did not have past misconduct or demonstrable bias. This is an effective way to demonstrate compliance with the WAC requirements.



2

Conflict of interest assessments should be complete and timely

State rules require IIT members, including the investigators and community representatives, to complete “conflict of interest” assessments within 72 hours of starting an investigation. The assessments help determine if IIT members have any connections to the officers being investigated that would potentially impair their objectivity. Best practices require investigators to be removed from a case if the IIT commander and community representatives determine the conflict would affect the investigation.

As discussed in our last summary report, we found that many IITs did not have all their members complete conflict of interest assessments at the start of the investigations. In 26 out of the 33 investigations we reviewed this year, IITs did not have some of their investigators or their community representatives fill out an assessment form.

In many instances, the IIT commander simply neglected to require investigators to fill out the form when they started working on the investigation. However, when the community representatives did not fill out a form, the IIT commanders often told us that they did not think it was a requirement, in part because the community representatives are responsible for reviewing the investigators’ assessments.

In many of the earlier investigations, IITs used conflict of interest forms that did not address all the components required by the WAC. The assessment must include questions about prior interactions or relationships with the involved officer(s), as well as address social conflicts, work conflicts and potential biases. Some of the IITs’ original forms often excluded questions about biases. Most IITs have since adopted the CJTC’s conflict of interest template form that is available on its website.

The 2022 version of the WAC now requires that IITs use the CJTC’s template or develop their own form that meets or exceeds the CJTC’s standards. Some

IITs are using revised versions of the CJTC form where they changed questions about potential biases. These IITs’ commanders said they thought the form’s questions were too subjective or repetitive. We shared some of the changes with the CJTC, and managers said that they did not think the revised forms met the WAC’s requirements. We recommended the CJTC provide guidance to IITs on how their forms can meet or exceed its standards. CJTC officials said questions on IIT-developed assessments need to elicit the same responses as the questions on the CJTC form.

3

Preserve the credibility of involved officer and witness interviews

The credibility of statements from officers and witnesses is critical in independent investigations. Although not the responsibility of the IIT, one requirement outlined in the CJTC’s best practices is for member agencies to prevent involved and witness officers from discussing the case with each other until the IIT takes their statements. This requirement is also reflected in most agency policies.

However, we have found that involved agencies’ incident reports often do not document orders to officers to not discuss the case. Many commanders said it is common practice among police departments to give those orders, but it is not the IITs’ responsibility to ensure involved agency supervisors do so, or that they document it.

We have recommended IIT member agencies give these directives and document that they did so in incident reports. Since interviews with involved officers often occur days or weeks after the use of force, it is important for an involved agency to document that it has taken steps to prevent officers and witnesses from discussing the case with each other.



4

Secure investigation files from unauthorized access

For 13 of the 33 audits conducted this year, we found the investigation team was not adequately restricting its case files. Best practices require independent investigation files be restricted to only investigators participating in the case.

We found that most teams use electronic records management systems that can restrict files to specific personnel, and they create audit logs to show the files were restricted to only those people. However, in many cases, we have found agency employees who are not involved in the investigations have accessed the case files. In other instances, we found officers from outside the investigating agency accessed files before they were restricted. Teams must restrict the case files to participating investigators and appropriate support staff as soon as possible to ensure unauthorized personnel do not access them.



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