

Riverside police watchdog group sees conflicts of interest at two levels

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A Riverside police watchdog group is asking that a member of the city's Community Police Review Commission be removed because of what the group says is a conflict of interest.

The complaint from the Riverside Coalition for Police Accountability, set for a Monday hearing, is the city's first ethics filing in about two years. But now the watchdog group is leveling the same charge -- conflict of interest -- at the body that will hear the complaint.

The coalition, a citizens group formed in 1999, filed a complaint Sept. 30 alleging that police review commission chairman Peter Hubbard should lose his seat on the panel.

Hubbard is a longtime employee of American Medical Response, a private ambulance company that serves Riverside. The coalition believes he has a conflict because he could respond to incidents that the police-review commission might later investigate.

The commission is tasked with reviewing and investigating complaints regarding police use of force and officer-involved deaths.

"Mr. Hubbard has been in the position of reviewing cases that involve his own employees," the citizens group's filing states.

Because the ambulance company has lucrative contracts with the city and county, the complaint alleges, it is in Hubbard's best interest to "maintain good relations" with those governments, which renders him a less than impartial commissioner.

Attempts to reach Hubbard for comment Thursday and Friday were unsuccessful.

Ethics complaints are normally heard by the mayor's nominating and screening committee, which includes Mayor Ron Loveridge and councilmen Steve Adams, William "Rusty" Bailey and Andy Melendrez.

But Michael Dunn, co-chairman of the coalition, said the group asked last week that the city appoint an independent panel to hear its complaint.

All four members of the mayor's committee have received campaign contributions from AMR's parent company, Colorado-based Emergency Medical Services Corp., and that could influence their decisions, Dunn said.

"We're not saying anybody has taken a bribe or broken the law, but there is the appearance of improprieties," Dunn said.

The city's ethics code and most other codes of conduct "always say that the appearance of a violation of these codes is sufficient for people to recuse themselves," Dunn said.

Riverside City Attorney Greg Priamos disagreed that the mayor's committee has a conflict.

In a Nov. 17 letter to Dunn's group, Priamos wrote, "Neither the city's code of ethics and conduct nor state law supports your position," and added that campaign contributions to elected officials are exempt from conflict of interest laws.

Reached by phone, Priamos declined to elaborate on the letter or to comment.

Adams said he doesn't see a conflict of interest either in him hearing the complaint or in Hubbard serving on the commission.

Even if AMR was called to an incident that became a case for the commission, Hubbard himself wouldn't be responding and his employees would not be involved in the incident, Adams said.

"They're just involved in providing medical assistance to whoever might need it," he said.

The police-accountability coalition believes that city officials have been diluting the effectiveness of the police review commission, both through procedural changes and who gets appointed, Dunn said. He sees Hubbard's position and the city's response to his complaint as part of that weakening pattern.

Adams disputed that the commission has been weakened or politicized. Dunn's group wants the commission to be able to dictate Police Department policy, and that is not its purpose, Adams said.

"This is a political issue they're raising" rather than an ethics problem, he said.

Dunn also wondered whether the city charter, which establishes the ethics code, trumps state ethics laws. If the charter is supreme, Dunn believes its guidance is clear: "Avoid participation in all decisions which create a real or perceived conflict of interest."

And if state law takes precedence, he said, "Why do we have a city code of conduct and ethics?"

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