Police Lt. Gussie Ellis says he strives to make people feel at ease when they come to the Internal Affairs Division to file a complaint against a police officer.

Internal Affairs Division
a place for public to turn

By GREG GARLAND
Advocate staff writer

Baton Rouge Police Lt. Gussie Ellis and the officers he supervises don't wear uniforms and they usually don't carry sidearms. There is a reason for their casual attire and demeanor.

Ellis, who heads the Police Department's Internal Affairs Division, said he doesn't want citizens with a complaint about a police officer to feel intimidated or uncomfortable about exercising their rights.

“One of the things I've strived for is to make people feel at ease,” Ellis said. He said it may be a person's first experience with the police. The person is there because he feels he has been wronged.

Ellis said he would prefer to see Internal Affairs located away from the Police Department's headquarters on Mayflower Street, to make the public feel even more comfortable.

“There are certain advantages to Internal Affairs located away from the Police Department's headquarters on Mayflower Street, to make the public feel even more comfortable.”

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Affairs being a division of the Police Department itself,” Ellis said. “The ideal situation, in the workshops I’ve attended, is that it should be in a separate location. It should not be as we are here, in-house.”

Ellis said his division’s role is to investigate citizen complaints, interview witnesses and compile reports. Those reports are then sent to Police Chief Wayne Rogillio’s office.

Deputy Chief Avon Satterwhite first reviews the reports, Ellis said, and may make a recommendation on taking disciplinary action. The final decision rests with the chief, Ellis said.

Minor complaints, such as those involving discourtesy, may be referred to supervisors, Ellis said, but any complaint that could lead to serious disciplinary action is sent to the chief’s office.

Ellis said many people call or come in without an understanding of how a police officer is supposed to perform his duty. Once that is explained, Ellis said, many withdraw their complaints.

“We don’t refuse a complaint from anyone,” Ellis said. “We will investigate the complaint. If the administration feels there is not enough evidence to support or substantiate the claim, the chief will rule as he sees fit.”

Ellis said citizens have to understand that police officers have rights, just as anyone else. A citizen may feel he or she has a valid complaint, but no action can be taken unless it can be proven, Ellis said.

“The accused gets the benefit of the doubt,” Ellis said. “We have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the officer committed the alleged act of wrongdoing.

A person making a complaint has to sign a complaint form, agreeing to appear in court or civil service hearings. He also has 10 working days in which to produce witnesses and furnish medical records or other documents.

The form warns that any false statements to Internal Affairs investigators is a violation of criminal mischief statutes and could lead to a fine of up to $500 or a jail term of up to six months.

An officer who is suspended or fired can appeal the disciplinary action to the Municipal Fire and Police Civil Service Board, a five-member body that reviews the facts and hears witnesses in a judicial type proceeding.

The board consists of one member elected by Police Department employees, one member elected by Fire Department employees, one member appointed by the mayor and two members appointed by the Metro Council — one a Southern University alumnus and the other an LSU alumnus.

The five members now serving are: Police Sgt. Vernet Johnson; Fire Equipment Operator Sammy Gill; David Jordan, the Southern University alumnus; T.O. Perry, the LSU alumnus; and Andy O’Brien, a lawyer appointed by the mayor.

O’Brien is scheduled to be sworn in at the board’s next meeting. He will replace private investigator Bruce Childers, who is resigning. Childers has said he plans to run for Baton Rouge Clerk of Court.