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N.J. State Police should speed up internal investigations, watchdog report says

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A new report is critical of how the New Jersey State Police has handled some low-level discipline cases and faults investigators for sometimes taking too long, but overall the review concluded the agency followed the law in handling internal investigations.

The Office of the State Comptroller also raised concerns that the attorney general's office has never examined whether a trooper's gender, race or rank affects how they're disciplined.

"Although our review found general compliance with governing procedures for misconduct complaints, we identified several weaknesses and have provided recommendations ... to prevent discrimination," acting State Comptroller Kevin Walsh said in a statement.

Walsh's report, his office's seventh concerning how the state's largest police department investigates its own, was published late last month.

A State Police spokesman said they were "committed to providing professional and compassionate service to the public."

"As we look toward the future, we will continue to hold our troopers to the highest standards and incorporate practices that foster transparency and accountability," Sgt. Lawrence Peele wrote in an email.

The agency has adopted at least two of the report's recommendations to make it easier for residents to flag problems.

The State Police's website now lists an email anyone can use to file complaints against a trooper: OPSIntakeUnit@NJSP.org. Officials have also removed an online warning that someone who submits a false report "may be subject to criminal prosecution."

That could discourage people from filing legitimate grievances, the report said.

As part of its review, Walsh's office reviewed dozens of State Police misconduct investigations, and it generally appeared "that discipline imposed was consistently meted out."

But the report also said police were wrong to dismiss some complaints just because the accusations dealt with more minor issues, such as a trooper being rude to a driver.

Leaving "even those unaddressed can lead troopers to develop poor work habits that can lead to more serious issues," the review concluded.

The State Police disagreed and argued it was a better use of resources to focus on more serious complaints, according to the report.

Furthermore, a dozen internal investigations of alleged misconduct blew past the 120-day deadline, Walsh's team said. The report only looked at 39 investigations, meaning almost a third were delayed — and investigators failed to formally ask for extensions in a handful of those cases.

Troopers accused of wrongdoing often can't be promoted and transferred until investigations conclude, the report pointed out. "Additionally, complainants and the public will have greater confidence in the investigative process if the 120-day rule is adhered to unless extensions are requested."

The State Police pledged to speed up investigations, according to report.

The comptroller also pushed the Office of Law Enforcement Professional Standards, a division of the state attorney general's office, to use "existing data" to examine, for example, if Black troopers were disciplined more severely than other troopers.

The division did not say whether they would adopt that recommendation.

In a statement to NJ Advance Media, attorney general spokeswoman Whitney Lewis wrote that they'll "continue to work with the State Police to strengthen the Division's professional standards and ongoing initiatives to prevent discrimination."

The attorney general's office did hire an outside law firm last year to investigate whether the State Police discriminate when hiring and promoting.

No conclusions have yet been announced.