

# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGEMENT IN THE POLICE: CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to analyze the occupational health and safety (OHS) management system within the Police, one of the largest uniformed services in Poland.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article discusses the specific occupational hazards faced by police officers, including the risk of physical injuries, exposure to biological and chemical agents, as well as psychological burdens resulting from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It also presents the current legal regulations governing the organization and operation of the OHS service in the Police.

**Findings:** The paper identifies existing challenges and issues, such as the insufficient number of OHS personnel and inconsistencies in the observance of reporting hierarchies. It also emphasizes the need for further corrective and supplementary actions to improve working conditions for police officers.

**Originality/value:** The conclusions from this analysis may serve as a basis for implementing more effective solutions in occupational safety management within the Police.

**Keywords:** police, occupational health and safety service, occupational hazards.

## 1. Introduction

The Police is one of the largest employers in Poland, with a force of over 100,000 officers who carry out their duties in accordance with the Police Act (<https://policja.pl>, 2024). The essence of their work is to ensure safety at the individual, social, institutional, and national levels. The primary responsibilities of the Police are outlined in Article 1 of the Police Act (Ustawa, 1990), and include, among others:

- Protecting the life and health of individuals, as well as property, from unlawful attacks that violate these goods.
- Ensuring public safety and order (maintaining peace in public places, public transportation, and traffic, as well as on waterways).

- Initiating and organizing actions aimed at preventing crimes, misdemeanors, and criminogenic phenomena.
- Detecting crimes and misdemeanors and apprehending their perpetrators.
- Protecting facilities that house members of the Council of Ministers.
- Supervising specialized armed security formations.
- Monitoring compliance with administrative and public order regulations in connection with public activities or those in public places (Ustawa, 1990), and many others.

The execution of these tasks involves numerous risks (Dziedzic, 2011; Gałusza, 2018; Szankin, 2013). Work in the Police is characterized by a significantly higher-than-average occupational risk of health or life-threatening situations due to the nature of the service. Police officers operate under difficult conditions (e.g., patrolling dangerous areas, conducting interventions, and using direct coercive measures). Specific working conditions and requirements include shift work (disrupting the work-rest-sleep balance) and work-related stress. The nature of police service involves a constant state of readiness and availability to perform specific tasks (Dziedzic, 2012). This profession requires exceptional psychological and physical fitness. It is evident that police work is dangerous. Officers are at a higher risk of bodily injury, permanent disability, or even death, often as a result of actions taken against individuals they intervene with, or while participating in rescue operations during natural disasters. Depending on the duties performed, the level of risk may vary, but it is always present.

Occupational health and safety (OHS) issues within the Police are perceived differently than in typical work environments, where hazardous situations and other burdens are often a result of misperceptions of safety rules. The role of the OHS service is critical, as it provides employers with information about the state of occupational safety and health in police units. Based on this information, employers can take actions aimed at strengthening oversight in areas related to OHS. According to Article 207 § 1 of the Labor Code (Dz.U. 1974, Nr 24, poz. 141, 1974), the employer is responsible for the state of health and safety in the workplace. The obligations of employees concerning health and safety at work, as well as the delegation of OHS tasks to specialists not employed by the workplace, do not diminish the employer's responsibility. Under Article 237 of the Labor Code (Dz.U. 1974, Nr 24, poz. 141, 1974), supervisory bodies of state organizational units, including the Police, are obligated to take actions to shape safe and hygienic working conditions. This includes conducting at least one annual assessment of the state of OHS in the supervised units and indicating directions for improvement.

The assessment of the occupational health and safety management system encompasses both the identification of OHS needs (including the identification of safety hazards) and the preparation of risk analysis. Through such measures, the employer can take necessary organizational, human, and technical actions that address the defined needs of the unit in terms of improving working conditions.

The aim of this article is to analyze the occupational health and safety (OHS) management system in the Police, one of the largest uniformed services in Poland. Based on data from OHS status assessment reports in units under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the article highlights the need for further corrective and supplementary actions to improve the working conditions of police officers. The conclusions drawn from the analysis may serve as a basis for implementing more effective solutions in OHS management within the Police.

## 2. Characteristics of occupational hazards in the Police

Occupational exposure can be defined as the exposure to dangerous, harmful, or burdensome factors associated with performing work duties (PN-N-18002). Four groups of occupational hazards can be distinguished (Ulewicz et al., 2015; Niciejewska, Kapler, 2023; Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023; Rączkowski, 2024):

- **Physical hazards** (including mechanical, electrical, dust, thermal risks, noise—which can cause hearing damage, mechanical vibrations, lighting—especially during night service, optical and laser radiation, electromagnetic fields—such as those encountered when operating radar speed detectors or radios, and others. This also includes microclimate and changing weather conditions, which may cause risks related to heatstroke, frostbite, fainting, etc.).
- **Chemical hazards** (involving exposure to chemical substances and preparations, including carcinogenic substances, toxic, irritant, mutagenic substances, and lead—e.g., during fingerprinting or handling firearms).
- **Biological hazards** (caused by prions, viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, plant and animal factors, pathogenic microorganisms, as well as animal bites, insect stings, etc.).
- **Psychophysical hazards** (related to physical strain—static, dynamic, and repetitive tasks, psychophysical strain, and stress, including PTSD).

In terms of hazard factors, there are three types (PN-Z-08052; Ulewicz et al., 2015; Niciejewska, Kapler, 2023; Karczewski, Karczewska, 2012; Piwowarski, 2020):

- **Dangerous factors** (those that, when acting on the employee, may lead to injury or an accident at work).
- **Harmful factors** (those that can cause or lead to the onset of illnesses).
- **Burdensome factors** (those that do not pose a direct threat to life and health but hinder work and significantly impact the ability to perform tasks, reducing efficiency and causing difficulties or discomfort).

It is not without reason that police officers enjoy greater legal protection than other citizens. This is due to the greater number of dangers they may encounter during and outside of service. For example, one of the most common threats is an active assault on an officer, a hazard that is typified in Art. 222 and 223 of the Penal Code (Ustawa, 1997). This is a danger that officers must always be aware of, and although they are specially trained to handle it, in many cases, it cannot be entirely eliminated.

Another threat is direct contact with detainees (Świerczewski, 2016). This is an enforced interaction. When a police officer intervenes to arrest someone, they inevitably come into contact with the individual, which could expose them to bodily fluids such as blood, and thus to infectious diseases (e.g., HIV, tuberculosis, hepatitis, influenza, chickenpox, and others). Although there are procedures in place to reduce such risks (e.g., wearing protective gloves), it is not always possible to follow them (e.g., in dynamic interventions). It should also be noted that an officer may come into contact with blood while providing assistance. During arrests, particularly with individuals who resist and struggle, officers often find themselves in uncomfortable positions in various locations, leading to a range of injuries.

Other hazards encountered by officers during service include: contact with animals, especially dangerous dog breeds, car accidents during pursuits or even regular patrols (due to the improper behavior of drivers towards emergency vehicles such as patrol cars using lights and sirens).

Among the burdensome factors are noise, fluctuating weather conditions, air polluted with contaminated substances (sometimes exposure to toxic, explosive materials), performing procedural and non-procedural tasks in challenging conditions (e.g., inspections in basements, attics, hard-to-reach places, confined, humid areas, cold or extreme heat), as well as dealing with human aggression and interpersonal conflicts.

Police work imposes particularly high demands on those who perform it. The nature of the profession, which is tied to maintaining public safety and order, results in significant psychological and physical strain. Therefore, stress is an inherent element of this job. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that appears in individuals who have experienced traumatic events in their lives. Additionally, irregular working hours, weekend service (including holidays), night patrols, phone duty, and emergency shifts contribute to the health costs officers bear, affecting their mental, physical, family, social, and spiritual well-being. Given that their job involves exposure to violence, aggression, death, and shocking incidents, police officers are at risk of occupational diseases such as neurosis, depression, various addictions (particularly alcoholism), and even self-harm.

A constant element of police service is occupational risk, which arises from dangerous situations and events in which officers are involved—this risk cannot be entirely eliminated. As mentioned earlier, the Police force comprises over 100,000 officers who are exposed to numerous dangers daily. According to the Assessment of the State of Occupational Health and Safety (Service) in 2022 in Units Under the Supervision of the Ministry of the Interior and

Administration (2023), 27 types of harmful factors were monitored within the Police in 2022 (including 13 chemical, 7 biological, 5 physical, and 2 dust types), along with 5 types of burdensome factors to which both police officers and civilian employees were exposed. No upward trend in these hazards was noted.

As an example of the most significant measures taken in 2022 to minimize hazards and reduce harmful and burdensome factors, it was noted that carcinogenic or mutagenic chemical substances of hazard categories 1A and 1B were withdrawn from use within the Police force (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023).

### **3. Legal and organizational framework of occupational health and safety in the Police**

#### **3.1. Legal regulations governing occupational health and safety in the Police**

The functioning, organization, and scope of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) service in the Police are regulated by the Ordinance of the Council of Ministers dated September 2, 1997, on the Occupational Health and Safety Service (Dz.U. Nr 109, poz. 704, z późn. zm., 1997). The qualifications required for individuals responsible for OHS tasks are also specifically outlined. According to its provisions, an occupational health and safety service is established within police units, which may be organized as a single-person or multi-person unit. The employer determines the number of OHS staff based on the number of employees, working conditions, and associated occupational hazards and job burdens. However, as stipulated by the aforementioned ordinance, if between 100 and 600 employees are employed, the employer must create a single or multi-person unit or employ an OHS worker in this unit on a part-time basis. If more than 600 employees are employed, the employer must employ at least one full-time OHS staff member for every 600 employees.

Regarding the reporting structure, the OHS service reports directly to the employer. In the case of an employer being an organizational unit, the OHS service reports directly to the person managing the unit or a member of the managing body or someone authorized by this body to oversee OHS matters. The definition of "employer" in the case of the Police is clarified by Order No. 916 of the Chief of Police (Zarządzenie nr 916, 2004), which states that the employer is:

- For officers serving in organizational units of the General Police Headquarters, the Chief of Police.
- For officers serving in the organizational units of the Provincial Police Headquarters (or Metropolitan Police Headquarters), the Provincial (or Metropolitan) Police Commander.

- For officers serving in county, city, and district police units, the respective County, City, or District Police Commander, and
- For officers serving at the Police Academy in Szczytno, the Police Training Center in Legionowo, and the Police Schools in Piła, Słupsk, and Katowice, the respective commanders of these institutions.

### **3.2. Employer and Officer Responsibilities Regarding OHS**

The aforementioned Order No. 916 of the Chief of Police (Zarządzenie nr 916, 2004) adapts the provisions found in Section X of the Labor Code (Ustawa, 1974) to the Police, as well as general and industry-specific OHS regulations issued on its basis. The content of the order clearly states that the employer is obliged to provide police officers with safe and hygienic service conditions, ensuring compliance with regulations and preventing risks to the life and health of officers (Zarządzenie nr 916, 2004). Furthermore, to ensure safe and hygienic working conditions for police officers and other police employees, the following provisions are applied:

- Section X of the Act of June 26, 1974, Labor Code (unless otherwise specified by the Police Act or other special provisions).
- All general and industry-specific OHS regulations issued based on Section X of the Labor Code that can be applied to analogous work performed within the Police, as well as rules, instructions, guidelines, and standards that indicate the manner in which tasks related to the exploitation, maintenance, repair, or renovation of facilities, equipment, and gear should be carried out (§3 Zarządzenia nr 916 Komendanta Głównego Policji, 2004).

According to §4 point 2 of the Order (Zarządzenie nr 916 Komendanta Głównego Policji, 2004), the provision of safe and hygienic service conditions is to be achieved by preparing and organizing police service in a manner that prevents accidents, occupational diseases, and health conditions related to service conditions.

## **4. Analysis of Occupational Safety in the Police Based on Reports**

Based on the "Assessment of Occupational Safety and Health (Service) Conditions in 2022 in Organizational Units Subordinate to and Supervised by the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration," irregularities or the need for corrective actions in 2021 were observed, particularly in the area of the organizational structure of OHS. Specifically, these issues included insufficient staffing levels in the OHS services and OHS reporting lines that were not in compliance with legal regulations (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023).

An analysis of the information provided for 2022 showed that, despite efforts made, the situation regarding OHS in the Police still requires further corrective actions. For example, non-compliance concerning the number of employees in OHS services was noted in 8 units in 2021, and in 7 units in 2022. Their analysis is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.**

*Organizational Status in 2021 – Units Where Non-Compliance Was Recorded*

Name and location of the unit	Number of non-compliances/number of employees
KWP Lublin	1/658
CBŚP	1/700
KMP Gdynia	1/687
KMP Olsztyn	1/701
KMP Poznań	1/617
KWP Rzeszów	1/750
KRP Warszawa II Mokotów	1/710

Source: Own study based on the Assessment of the State of Occupational Health and Safety (Service) in 2022 in Organizational Units Subordinate to and Supervised by the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration.

**Table 2.**

*Organizational Status in 2022 – Units Where Non-Compliance Was Recorded*

Name and location of the unit	Number of non-compliances/number of employees
KWP Lublin	1/678
CBŚP	1/700
KMP Gdynia	1/674
KMP Olsztyn	1/691
KMP Poznań	1/609
KWP Rzeszów	1/690 (od lipca 3 etaty)
KMP Rzeszów	1/753

Source: Own study based on the Assessment of the State of Occupational Health and Safety (Service) in 2022 in Organizational Units Subordinate to and Supervised by the Minister of Interior and Administration.

The conducted analysis of the research results (Tables 1 and 2) indicates that the situation has minimally improved. At the same time, the Chief of Police has issued directives to continue efforts aimed at increasing the number of personnel employed in the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) units within the Police to meet the requirements set by law. Regarding the employment of OHS personnel in units where the workforce did not exceed 100 individuals, employers hired such personnel on a part-time basis or through civil law contracts (1 in the Masovian Voivodeship and 3 in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship) or on an unofficial basis (meaning that alongside their OHS duties, these individuals also performed other tasks but reported directly to the unit manager).

In 5 units in 2022, where the employment slightly exceeded 100 individuals, OHS tasks were performed on an unofficial basis. However, as a result of previously undertaken actions, part-time positions were established, creating a formal OHS service in 3 units: the District Police Headquarters (KPP) in Ropczyce, Kolbuszowa, and Lesko. In the KPP in Głubczyce and Wschowa, the designated OHS service carried out tasks on an ad-hoc basis, as there were no

applicants for the position. As for the issue of hierarchical subordination, in all units, their managers (except for the KPP in Strzelno) ensured the direct subordination of the OHS service to the employer, and the personnel of these services possessed the necessary education and professional qualifications (only in the KPP in Strzelno and KPP in Brzeziny (Łódź Voivodeship) were the employees in the process of acquiring the desired qualifications).

The Regulation of the Council of Ministers of September 2, 1997 (Dz.U. 1997, nr 109, poz. 704, 1997) also defines the tasks and powers of the OHS service, which include, among others, conducting inspections of working conditions and compliance with occupational health and safety regulations, continuously informing the employer about identified hazards along with recommendations for their elimination, as well as preparing and presenting analyses of the state of safety and health to the employer with proposals for initiatives aimed at preventing hazards and improving working conditions. The service is also involved in developing various documents, such as company collective labor agreements, internal regulations, instructions, and opinions on specific instructions, maintaining registers, compiling and storing OHS-related documents, participating in occupational risk assessments, providing general consulting, collaborating with laboratories, doctors (e.g., regarding periodic medical examinations of employees), and other external entities in the field of OHS, as well as a range of other activities detailed in §2 of the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of September 2, 1997 (Dz.U. 1997, nr 109, poz. 704, 1997). Among the functions of the OHS service listed in §2 point 11 of the mentioned Regulation is participation in determining the circumstances and causes of work-related accidents and in developing conclusions resulting from the investigation of the causes and circumstances of those accidents.

As for the post-accident procedures within the Police, they are governed by the Regulation of the Minister of the Interior of June 24, 2014, on the manner and procedure for determining the circumstances and causes of accidents in the Police, Border Guard, State Fire Service, and Government Protection Bureau (Dz.U. poz. 863, 2014). The diagnosed causes and circumstances of accidents required preventive decisions from the unit manager; thus, the following decisions were made: at the request of the accident investigation committees, unit managers formulated recommendations related to improving OHS conditions. As a result of these procedures, changes were made to the OHS instructions, wall-mounted handrails were installed on stairs, the rules of mutual assistance were reiterated to officers, and the use of direct coercion measures was emphasized. Special caution was advised during dynamic training exercises in the training rooms and increased attention and concentration during the performance of official duties (particularly during actions related to detaining aggressive individuals who do not comply with orders issued by officers) (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023).



The powers of the OHS service are detailed in §3 of the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of September 2, 1997. These include conducting inspections of occupational safety and health conditions, issuing recommendations to those in charge of employees to eliminate identified risks and occupational hazards, as well as deficiencies in occupational health and safety. It is worth mentioning the importance of inspections and audits regarding OHS, as they are effective means of evaluating the employer's compliance with the obligation to provide safe and hygienic working/service conditions for employees and highlight any irregularities and deviations from established norms through both internal and external OHS inspections.

According to the Assessment (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023), in 2021, the Police conducted 766 internal inspections and 268 external inspections, including 4 by the State Sanitary Inspection (PIS), 50 by the Technical Supervision Office (UTD), 214 inspections by the State Sanitary Inspector (PIS), and 2 sanitary inspections by the State Sanitary and Epidemiological Station (PSSE), as well as 3 audits. In 2022, 802 internal inspections and 600 external inspections were conducted (including 4 by the National Labor Inspectorate (PIP), 158 by the UTD, and 438 inspections by the PIS) and 1 audit. Following each inspection, monitoring was conducted to improve the technical and sanitary-hygienic conditions of the utilized facilities, and ergonomic equipment was replaced at workstations as resources permitted. The managers of the Police units made appropriate substantive decisions, for example, regarding solutions in the area of preventive measures concerning OHS (including the supplementation and updating of occupational risk assessment cards) and maintenance and construction works. However, priority was given to those tasks that indicated a direct threat to the health of employees and officers (for example, urgent testing of hot water for the presence of Legionella bacteria was ordered—the conducted tests showed no contamination of the water).

The identified irregularities and deficiencies, which could be eliminated without excessive financial costs, were addressed promptly, utilizing internal labor resources and the cooperation of qualified personnel specializing in repairs. Other tasks related to improving OHS conditions were included in financial plans or investment-repair plans for subsequent years. However, the implementation of high-cost proposals requiring specialized labor remains problematic. In such situations, systematic supervision is maintained concurrently by both the OHS service and the unit manager of the Police to ensure funding for achieving basic objectives in the upcoming years.

#### **4.1. Most Common Accidents and Injuries Among Officers**

In terms of the most frequent accidents and injuries occurring among officers, the Assessment (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023)

indicates that in 2022, out of a total of 4365 reported accidents involving police officers, as many as 3954 were service-related, while 411 occurred during travel to or from the place of duty. Of this total, 205 were collective accidents involving 433 officers. The most common circumstances leading to injuries sustained by officers in service included incidents during interventions arising from the statutory activities of police officers (which constituted the largest group), falls while moving, injuries during training exercises, shooting training, assaults on officers, and traffic accidents involving drivers or passengers.

There are also instances where police officers lose their lives in the line of duty. The main cause of fatalities among police officers is involvement in traffic incidents while responding to calls, during pursuits, as well as being shot or attacked with a weapon by perpetrators. It is also important to mention deaths due to COVID-19 infections during the pandemic. According to the aforementioned Assessment (*Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023*), there were 5 fatalities in 2021, and 6 in 2022 (fatalities among officers were linked to activities undertaken in connection with their service).

## **5. Recommendations and proposals for improvement**

A crucial element related to occupational health and safety is training. Programs for training, education, and professional development of police officers should encompass issues of service/work safety and hygiene (*Zarządzenie nr 916 Komendanta Głównego Policji, 2004*). Health and safety training is mandatory for all police officers, regardless of their position or function (*Jamrozik, 2021*). The scope of health and safety training includes not only principles of safety and hygiene but also various specific procedures, such as the use of firearms, driving under difficult conditions, self-defense techniques and tactics, and procedures to follow in situations involving biological, chemical, or radiological threats. Furthermore, training is focused on psychological aspects of acting under threat, stress management techniques, and coping with trauma.

Regarding the frequency and types of health and safety training within the Police, officers are required to participate in general introductory training (mandatory for anyone starting service in the police), as well as site-specific introductory training and periodic training conducted every five years (*eszkoleniaBHP.com, 2024*).

Additionally, the Police conducts specialized training sessions that do not fall under the categories of introductory and periodic training. In 2022, regarding employer initiatives related to promoting first aid and conducting training in this area (*Kodeks Pracy, 1974*), such training sessions were conducted for a total of 23,153 individuals. These training sessions covered first aid, qualified first aid, first aid in combat situations, responses to specific threats, managing

atypical behaviors, operating AED, water rescue, and principles of first aid concerning interventions with individuals whose behavior suggests potential drug use or psychological disturbances, among others (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023). An essential element of health and safety services is preventive health protection, which involves conducting medical examinations and issuing medical certificates based on those examinations.

## 6. Conclusion

In 2021, irregularities were identified and corrective actions were deemed necessary regarding the organization of health and safety services in the Police. These issues included an insufficient number of personnel in health and safety services and non-compliance with regulations regarding their reporting structure. Consequently, there is a need to increase staffing levels in health and safety services and ensure an appropriate hierarchical structure. Another crucial aspect is ensuring that personnel have the necessary professional qualifications. Additionally, it is essential to address the issue of so-called combined positions, where employees, besides their other duties, also perform health and safety responsibilities, which may lead to incomplete or unsatisfactory execution of tasks resulting from §2(1) (Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów, 1997) due to excessive workload.

It is worth noting that the remuneration of health and safety service employees, compared to other positions, is not attractive, leading some personnel to resign from their roles in health and safety services for this reason. According to the Assessment (Ocena stanu bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy (służby) w 2022 r. w jednostkach podległych i nadzorowanych przez Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2023), the challenges and difficulties related to health and safety in the Police in 2022 included a persistent high number of vacancies, resulting in additional burdens on current officers with tasks exceeding their capacity to fulfill during their service hours, ultimately leading to physical exhaustion and professional burnout.

Therefore, it is advisable to continue efforts to:

- Supplement the number of individuals employed in health and safety services to meet legal requirements.
- Organize all organizational units to report health and safety services directly to the unit's supervisor.
- Analyze the workload of health and safety service employees in cases of non-permanent employment or the combination of health and safety tasks with other responsibilities, concerning the feasibility of task execution.

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