

The Star-Ledger

N.J. lawmakers advance policing reforms in wake of George Floyd protests

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published July 28, 2020

Proposals to expand bias training and increase minority hiring within police departments were approved by New Jersey lawmakers with bipartisan support, with some lamenting that it took the death of George Floyd and other Black Americans to advance ideas introduced years ago.

The state Senate Law and Public Safety Committee also voted Tuesday for a bill criminalizing calling 911 in order to harass somebody because of their race, a response to a recent high-profile incident in Central Park when a white woman falsely claimed a Black bird watcher was threatening her.

“The time is right to do bills like this,” state Sen. Linda Greenstein, D-Middlesex, said during the hearing.

“The time was right back then,” countered state Sen. Ronald Rice, D-Essex, after speaking about the civil rights movement. “I’m tired of fighting the same battles over and over.”

Other bills would better track the race of people being arrested and allow former prisoners who completed their sentences to receive more help after their release. Each proposal, including some already approved by the state Assembly, move to the full Senate after receiving support from both Republicans and Democrats.

Both chambers must approve a bill before it can head to the governor.

One proposal (S401) would require departments create a “minority recruitment and selection program” to hire more women and people of color. Currently, many agencies employ a larger share of white people than live in their communities, but a lack of data makes it difficult to know how diverse many departments are.

Fewer than 4,000 of the state’s more than 36,000 full-time officers were women in 2016, according to the State Police.

However, the bill does not set specific goals or detail what would happen if a department failed to diversify, and lawmakers discussed amendments to tighten requirements. Legislative researchers concluded any change would require local governments spend more money, but they said an exact cost was unknown.

Other proposals (S2689 and S419) would require police receive implicit bias and cultural diversity training and require departments reach out to the “cultural, religious, and civic organizations” around them. Similar training is already mandated by the state attorney

general, but lawmakers noted requirements can change with a new administration unless the law is re-written.

Although filing a false police report is already a crime, two bills (S2635 and S2578) would increase penalties for anyone who called 911 in order to threaten somebody because of their race, religion or sexual orientation, among other categories. Anyone found guilty could face prison time and thousands of dollars in fines.

Another proposal (S2638) would beef up data collection, by requiring New Jersey to publicly report more information about the race and age of those arrested, and how charges and pleas for one group compare to others.

“This will help us to identify any problem areas and develop appropriate solutions,” state Sen. Tom Kean, R-Union, and one of the bill’s sponsors, said in a statement.

One bill (S415) would allow people who finished a prison sentence to enroll in drug treatment programs, receive housing help and other services from the state parole board. Currently, former inmates who “max out” do not have access to that state assistance, which lawmakers said increases the probability they will commit more crimes.