

# The Star-Ledger

## Invoking John Lewis, N.J. lawmakers pass policing and prison reforms

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New Jersey lawmakers passed bills Thursday that would change how residents are policed, sentenced and treated after they're released from prison, part of a wave of reforms gaining traction as protests against police brutality and systemic racism continue nationwide.

The votes took place the same day as the funeral for civil rights icon John Lewis, and state legislators invoked his name when discussing why some of the bills are needed.

After a bill was introduced criminalizing calling 911 to threaten somebody because of their race, state Sen. Ronald Rice, D-Essex, referenced Lewis' last essay and said, "we have a right, an obligation, to move this type of legislation."

That proposal (A1906) passed unanimously, 40-0, and now heads to Gov. Phil Murphy for final approval.

"The stakes are too high to wait any longer and the sustained protests around the country have made it clear that the time for change is now," state Sen. Shirley Turner, D-Lawrence, said in a statement.

Other bills focused on police hiring and training.

Departments must develop a "minority recruitment and selection program" if one bill (A2394) becomes law. The proposal says departments must make a "good faith effort" to hire more women and people of color, but it doesn't set specific goals beyond saying agencies should reflect "the diversity of the population" around them.

It passed the state Senate 38-1 and now heads to the governor.

Another proposal (A4366) beefs up mental health training for officers, particularly to help cops deal with residents having psychiatric episodes. It passed the state Assembly 75-0, and now heads to the Senate.

At the same time, the state Senate voted for a bill (S419) that expands cops' diversity training.

Although lawmakers delayed voting on a first-in-the-nation bill that would potentially release thousands of inmates early because of the coronavirus, they moved on other proposals affecting state prisons.

Significantly, one bill (A4369) could dramatically lower prison populations by eliminating mandatory minimum sentences for some nonviolent crimes. It was approved in the Assembly 52-19 with three abstaining.

Another (A4372) creates a pathway for some people sentenced to decades behind bars for crimes committed as juveniles to be re-sentenced. It was approved by the Assembly 47-24, with three abstaining.

One proposal (S415) would offer housing help and other services to people who finished their full sentences, services currently not available to former inmates who “max out” of the system.

A resolution (SJR79) would study sexual abuse within the state’s only women’s prison, after a scathing report from the U.S. Department of Justice found widespread abuse. It passed the Assembly 75-0, and now heads to the governor’s desk.