

# The Star-Ledger

## **After months of delay, N.J. lawmakers to consider giving residents more power to investigate cops**

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New Jersey lawmakers will begin debate on a bill Wednesday to give residents more power to investigate local cops, the first time the Legislature has scheduled a discussion for one of the most sweeping reforms proposed in the wake of protests last year after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis.

The bill (A4656) would allow towns statewide to create civilian complaint review boards, which could force departments to hand over internal documents and run inquiries at the same time officers were investigating their own.

The state Assembly's Community Development and Affairs Committee is scheduled to consider the proposal at 9:15 a.m., and the virtual hearing will be streamed online.

The bill is still a long way from becoming law. If the committee approves it, the proposal will still need to be voted on by the full state Assembly and Senate before it can head to the governor's desk.

Gov. Phil Murphy has previously signaled support for at least parts of the bill.

While many residents have recently called for broad policing reforms, lawmakers have so far opted for more moderate changes.

Newark tried to create a board with broad investigatory powers, but the state Supreme Court ruled last year that current law doesn't allow boards to issue subpoenas or run simultaneous investigations.

If residents wanted those powers, the justices wrote, they'd need to change the law.

A broad coalition of activists, religious and community groups are expected to testify Wednesday in support of the bill, some of whom have been fighting for decades for more civilian oversight.

Police union leaders did not immediately respond to questions about whether they planned to attend the hearing, but officials have previously argued that boards threaten to obstruct a department's ability to fairly and effectively investigate complaints.

If the bill became law, both cities and counties would be able to create boards to oversee police in their area.

Local officials would appoint seven members familiar with “community relations, civil rights, law enforcement, sociology, or other relevant fields,” according to the proposal. The board would work for free, but members could have expenses reimbursed and the bill would set aside \$600,000 for training.

If a resident complained about excessive force or “abuse of authority,” the board could launch an investigation.

However, that review would have to stop if prosecutors launched a criminal review into the same incident.

A board could recommend discipline, but it couldn’t force a department to punish or fire an officer.

The public would also be blocked from knowing the names of anyone the board interviewed, including officers.

Another bill (S2656) could make those names available by making internal police documents public, but that proposal has stalled since it was introduced in June.