

# The Star-Ledger

## About 50 people testify in support of N.J. bill that would give civilians more police oversight

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A group of New Jersey lawmakers approved a bill Wednesday to give residents more power to investigate local cops, after dozens of people from around the state testified they'd lost faith in police departments' ability to investigate their own.

The bill (A4656) would allow towns to create civilian complaint review boards, which could dig into allegations of excessive force and compel police to turn over internal documents. The state Assembly's Community Development and Affairs Committee approved an amended version of the proposal 4-1, with one abstention.

The bill still needs the green light from the full Assembly and Senate before it can head to Gov. Phil Murphy, who has said he supports giving boards subpoena power.

"It is truly a piece of legislation designed by the community, for the community," said Assemblywoman Angela McKnight, D-Hudson, who said she introduced the proposal in response to George Floyd's death in Minnesota last year. "I could not stand by, do nothing, and hope that this does not happen to a citizen in New Jersey."

About 50 people spoke in favor of the proposal during the more than two-and-a-half-hour hearing, and the committee's leader said more than 80 also signaled their support in writing.

Activists, teachers and local officials said only civilian oversight could prevent abuse, and many shared harrowing stories of violent interactions with officers. Several people listed relatives they said were assaulted or killed by cops, while others invoked names of men who recently died in police custody in Asbury Park and on the Garden State Parkway.

"Things like this have happened, unfortunately, in New Jersey already," said Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, who has fought for years to give his city's board broad investigatory powers, only to have the state Supreme Court rule that many of those powers were illegal under current law.

Mayors from Patterson and Jersey City, two of the state's largest, also spoke in support. The hearing was especially packed with residents of Jersey City, where both activists and council members want to establish their own board.

"There is no trust in the community," said Dennis Febo, head of the North Jersey education organization Guazabara Insights LLC. "No one in the community would feel comfortable or safe going to an internal affairs department."

Only one person spoke against the bill: Sean Lavin, a representative of the New Jersey Fraternal Order of Police, the union that successfully sued to limit Newark's oversight.

Lavin said officers were well-equipped to investigate alleged misconduct, and he said giving outsiders the ability to review police practices threatened fair and impartial reviews.

He also complained that his union had not been consulted on the proposal, despite a desire to partner with lawmakers.

McKnight, the bill's sponsor, said she did want his input but added that she had talked with other unions.

New Jersey's Policemen's Benevolent Association wrote McKnight a letter over the summer recommending several changes to an earlier version of the bill, including blocking boards from investigating incidents at the same time departments were running their own reviews.

An amendment passed Wednesday would require boards to wait 120 days before investigating a complaint, to give departments time to launch their own inquiries. Many who testified objected to that change and argued that only simultaneous investigations could ensure independent accountability.

Boards would also be able to investigate State Troopers, police leaders would have to explain certain decisions in writing, board members could be paid and more money would be set aside for training under other amendments adopted by the committee.

Not all officers are opposed. Jiles Ship, leader of the state chapter of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, said more civilian oversight was long overdue.

Nobody from the state attorney general's office testified Wednesday. That agency previously wrote rules that allow, but do not force, departments to share information with civilian boards.