

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. lawmakers pump the brakes on letting civilians investigate cops as activists demand more oversight**

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

Published June 21, 2021

State lawmakers on Monday held back a bill that would give civilians more power to investigate local police in New Jersey, which would include the authority to force departments to turn over internal documents, even as activists rallied to demand more oversight.

The state Assembly had scheduled a vote on a bill (A4656) to allow civilian complaint review boards to dig into allegations of misconduct, but leaders later pulled the proposal from consideration, at least temporarily.

A spokesman for Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, said the bill may need to be changed to pass.

“Amendments are being considered as we look to gain consensus,” Kevin McArdle wrote in a message to NJ Advance Media. A spokeswoman for one of the bill’s sponsors declined comment.

Several civil rights and advocacy organizations gathered outside the Statehouse Monday to demand the bill’s passage.

“Real police reform must include community oversight with subpoena, investigatory, and disciplinary powers,” Maati Sekmet Ra, co-founder of the Trenton Anti-Violence Coalition, said in a statement. “Anything less is status quo.”

Even if the current version of the proposal became law, the bill would still limit when civilian boards could launch their own reviews, prohibit investigations into the State Police and bar the general public from learning the names of officers accused of misconduct.

There should be no waiting period for boards to launch their own investigations, said Joe Marchica, chair of a local chapter of the nonprofit Our Revolution. He added that subpoena power shouldn’t be restricted in any way.

Several years ago, Newark tried to give a board the ability to subpoena documents and run investigations at the same time as the city’s department. A police union sued, arguing that simultaneous investigations by potentially unqualified civilians could endanger an agency’s ability to fairly investigate its own, and the state Supreme Court agreed that Newark had overstepped.

Changes to the law have already received green lights from two committees. In March, dozens testified in favor before the Assembly’s Community Development and Affairs

Committee, and the Appropriations Committee voted in favor last week after further amending the bill.

Under the proposal, towns or counties would have the option of appointing at least three people to dig into allegations of excessive force, lying, “offensive language” or “abuse of authority.”

If a resident filed a complaint, the board would first have to pass the complaint to a police department’s internal affairs division. If officers decided not to investigate, or hadn’t completed an investigation after 120 days, a board could subpoena witnesses and documents for its own inquiry.

Boards would also have to alert prosecutors if cops were suspected of breaking the law, and then wait for any criminal investigation to end.

If a board eventually concluded an officer had broken the rules and recommended discipline, the public would largely stay in the dark.

The bill says, “all personal identifying information contained in all records made, maintained, or kept on file by a civilian review board ... including in any reports ... shall be confidential and unavailable.”

Leaking information about a board’s work “with the intent to injure another” would be a fourth-degree crime.

Members would have to be trained, but individual municipalities would have a say in their board’s structure and could decide whether to pay members. The bill would set aside \$800,000 to pay for training.

People convicted of first- or second-degree crimes within the last ten years would be ineligible to serve.

The bill also directs departments statewide to allow anonymous complaints to be filed online, whether or not the town had a civilian board.

Gov. Phil Murphy has previously signaled support for civilian boards with investigatory powers.