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Controversial bill allowing cops to get early view of body cam footage clears N.J. Legislature

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New Jersey's Legislature approved a proposal Thursday to generally let cops review their own body camera footage before writing reports, although police would still have to write initial summaries from memory in cases where somebody died.

Critics have raised concerns that officers could omit key details about an incident if they knew what the footage did and didn't show, while police unions argued the change would simply allow for more accurate reports.

During debate at the Statehouse in Trenton, several senators also objected to last-minute changes that would allow witnesses, and potentially suspects, to view footage before making their statements.

The bill (A5864) passed the state Senate 31-4, just weeks after it was introduced. The Assembly quickly adopted the revised version 74-0.

It still needs approval from the governor to become law.

All New Jersey police were required to don body cameras by the start of the month, arguably the most significant piece of policing legislation to pass since George Floyd's death last year.

The rules governing their use prohibit officers from watching footage before writing their initial reports, although cops may amend what they write after watching video.

Some officers cried foul.

The "current restriction on reviewing camera footage presents significant concerns" for "writing clear and detailed reports," the state Policemen's Benevolent Association said in a statement.

With union support, lawmakers fast-tracked a change to the rules earlier this month.

Many social justice and civil rights organizations pushed back.

"This bill would permit officers to tailor their reports to fit the footage, potentially leaving out important details relating to their intentions, motivations and behaviors," Derick Dailey, a former federal prosecutor and legal fellow with the nonprofit Salvation and Social Justice wrote in a recent op-ed.

Lawmakers did change the original version to still prohibit police from initially watching video if an officer had fired a gun, used physical force, somebody filed a complaint or during certain internal affairs investigations.

Furthermore, a new amendment would also allow any “person who is the subject of a police report” to watch body camera footage before “preparing an initial report or statement” — as long as police were also allowed to consult the video.

That could lead to “unintended consequences” of suspected murderers and rapists getting access to police video, said state Sen. Nia Gill, D-Essex.

Colleagues on both sides of the aisle, Sens. Declan O’Scanlon, R-Monmouth, and Ron Rice, D-Essex, pleaded for more time to consider the changes, but they were overruled.

The newest version of the bill can be read [here](#).

NJ Advance Media staff writer Brent Johnson contributed to this report.