

# The Star-Ledger

**He set new limits on when police can use force. Long-serving N.J. attorney general leaves as cop training begins.**

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Early Thursday morning, Gurbir Grewal slipped into a Rutgers classroom.

None of the roughly four dozen police officers already inside seemed to notice when New Jersey's longest-serving attorney general in more than a quarter century took a seat in the back.

But everyone was there because of him.

"I don't think any of you went to the police academy thinking you would be marriage counselors, that you would be substance abuse counselors, that you would be mental health counselors," Grewal later told the group. But since so many 911 calls involve people in crisis, officers needed more tools to de-escalate volatile situations, he said.

The cops before him, sitting in Tillett Hall in Piscataway, represent a fraction of the state's approximately 38,000 officers who have been ordered to take similar de-escalation classes by the end of the year.

The training overhaul is one of Grewal's most significant, and unfinished, reforms.

Grewal, 48, stepped down Friday after three years and 182 days in office. The last time the state's top law enforcement leader stayed this long was the early 1990's. He will likely be remembered for both who he is, a barrier-breaking public official, and for decisions made during a national reckoning over race and policing.

Since he announced his resignation two and a half weeks ago, his staff have quickly advanced a host of priorities, offering a snapshot of a tenure that can now be either cemented or reversed by successors.

In late June, hours after Grewal said he was taking a job with a federal agency, he formally apologized for his office's past treatment of gay bars and ordered staff to look for evidence of other discrimination.

The next day he released footage of prison officers yanking women from their cells, in line with a policy to often publish footage of violent encounters with law enforcement.

A week later he helped file a lawsuit against Google, accusing it of running an illegal monopoly, while withdrawing a different lawsuit against the federal government, one of a mountain of complaints that challenged Trump-era rules.

Then his staff released data detailing millions of State Police traffic stops, announced a settlement with an opioid manufacturer and successfully freed a man who spent years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Amid that activity, sitting in class Thursday almost counted as a calm moment.

On screens, trainers from the Police Executive Research Forum showed a series of videos.

In the first, officers in San Francisco confronted a man with a knife. The encounter ended in gunshots.

In the second, officers in Minnesota confronted a man with a knife. Gunshots.

In the third, officers in Texas confronted a man swinging a baseball bat. After a few moments, a cop realized his very presence was amping up the man, who wasn't a suspect and wasn't breaking any laws. So the police left.

The silence was deafening.

As the class debated each officer's actions, the attorney general watched silently, fingers interlaced in front of a graying beard.

More than 2,000 people have served as state attorneys general throughout United States history, according to the National Association of Attorneys General.

None had followed Sikhism, a centuries-old religion, until Grewal took office early 2018.

Born to Indian immigrant parents in Hudson County, Grewal once said that, growing up, he and his friends would pretend that anybody emigrating to America received a special map with just one location: Jersey City.

He made that remark sitting in a black SUV in December 2019. Earlier that month, just two miles from Grewal's childhood home, two people had opened fire at a kosher market, killing several.

A state trooper was driving Grewal and two staffers from a Jersey City precinct to one of the victim's homes. As they weaved through traffic, Grewal gestured past the windshield to the immigrant-run businesses, churches, mosques and synagogues clustered within a few short blocks.

"This is America right here," he said.

Grewal often speaks about how he wants his religious and cultural identity to intersect with his work.

He was a federal prosecutor in New York and New Jersey before then-Gov. Chris Christie made him the top law enforcement official in the state's most populous county.

Paul Fishman, the former U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, recalled asking why Grewal wanted to become Bergen County Prosecutor.

"It's really important for people to see somebody who looks like me in that job," Fishman remembered Grewal saying.

As attorney general, Grewal's testified before members of Congress and met with the President Joe Biden, while crisscrossing the state to speak at churches and vigils and schools.

When he spoke early last year to students at Bergen County Academies, an elite high school in Hackensack, he specifically addressed the many Asian Americans in the auditorium.

"If you have Asian parents, you know they don't encourage you to go to public service, right?" he said to growing laughter. "For me it was, 'Gurbir, you've got to become a doctor, or you can become a doctor, or you can become a doctor.'"

The crowd went nuts.

Other moments have been more somber.

After several Asian women were killed earlier this year during a shooting spree in Georgia, Grewal scheduled virtual events with New Jersey Congressman Andy Kim and Connecticut Attorney General William Tong, the first Asian Americans to hold their respective jobs.

Public discussions could help combat hate crimes, Grewal said to Tong. "If we weren't here, I don't know if ... two other AG's would be having this conversation."

"Representation matters," Tong responded.

Grewal's turban covers his ears, so he uses a stretchy piece of plastic to secure coronavirus masks around his head.

On Thursday, his mask bore the logo of the Office of the Attorney General.

"You would think the OAG mask would be turban friendly," he said.

New Jersey attorneys general have more direct authority over local cops than counterparts in any other state.

Since Grewal was in charge when George Floyd was murdered, his legacy is closely tied to what he did (and didn't) change about local policing.

Grewal established new limits on when police can hit, chase or shoot suspects, the first re-write of the state's use-of-force policy in decades.

That was accompanied by a website allowing residents to track every time cops use physical force statewide, providing a level of detail experts said doesn't exist elsewhere.

He also rejected calls to "defund the police" and rolled out a new "resiliency" program to reduce officer suicides.

Some civil rights and transparency advocates wanted him to go further, especially when it came to making police discipline records public. During an interview Thursday he agreed more internal documents should be shared — but he cautioned that police first needed to change how they track discipline so sensitive information can easily be redacted.

Law enforcement leaders often publicly backed him, although rules restricting when police can cooperate with federal immigration officers were challenged by a South Jersey sheriff, and police unions sued to block his plan to publicly identify officers found guilty of serious misconduct.

Both challenges were unsuccessful.

The latter move, to publicize the identities of some disciplined cops, changed his relationship with the unions.

When he addressed officers in the Rutgers classroom, he noted that Friday would be his last day. "For some of you, that may be great news," he said.

Later during an interview, he reflected that it might have been wise to invite union leaders more into the decision-making process about naming punished officers. But he also partially credited that policy change, announced just weeks after George Floyd's death, with largely keeping local protests peaceful.

"That was a unique moment in history," he said. "We didn't have the luxury of time."

Republicans have recently highlighted the discontent that does exist amid their campaign to deny Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy another four years.

Grewal was "anti-cop" and his resignation was "good news for our law enforcement community," Jack Ciattarelli, the GOP nominee for governor, recently Tweeted. "Unless, of course, Murphy replaces Grewal with another extreme partisan."

After rowdy crowds led one town to restrict beach access, some lawmakers blamed Grewal's rules that limit when cops can jail teens.

“Kids know they’re above the law and they’re taking advantage of it,” state Sen. Mike Testa, R-Cumberland, said in a statement.

Grewal also faces growing frustration over his office’s handling of a sting operation that enriched an informant with taxpayer money while failing to net any high-level elected officials.

A member of Grewal’s party, Democratic state Sen. Joe Cryan, called that investigation an “embarrassment.”

On Thursday, Grewal noted that case began before his time. (The criminal investigation started in December 2016, according to public records.) But he said “I have a lot of confidence in the investigators” who initiated and continue to oversee the inquiry.

Furthermore, sources familiar with the governor’s office have said tension had been building between Murphy and Grewal, as a result of Murphy’s staff feeling they were sometimes not fully looped in on Grewal’s initiatives.

During an interview in January, Grewal had said he hoped a re-elected Murphy would re-appoint him for another term.

Six months later, Grewal’s left for the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

Grewal said his resignation only stemmed from interest in the federal job, which he said he had not sought, and wasn’t because of problems with Murphy or any interest in future elected office.

“The whole notion of ‘tension’ and ‘friction’ — if it exists I haven’t seen it,” he said Thursday. There were certainly policy disagreements, he said, but the governor purposely kept a certain distance to give Grewal’s office independence.

Later during Thursday’s training, officers broke in small groups to act out violent scenarios they might face. Rutgers students played the roles of people in crisis.

In one, Joseph Chasey performed as Angry Man Swinging Baton while a cop tried to talk him down.

A little while into their exchange, Chasey set down the baton. Then he picked it back up. Then he set it down.

Afterward, during a debrief, Grewal asked a trainer if officers should have thanked Chasey for letting go of his weapon.

No, the trainer said. “We don’t want him to notice.”

Chasey seemed surprised to learn he had set down the baton. The cop had obviously relaxed him, he said.

At midnight Friday, Grewal's authority passed to one of his top lieutenants.

First Assistant Attorney General Andrew Bruck, who was with Grewal in that black SUV two years ago, is now acting attorney general.

Bruck will be in charge when the new police force guidelines take effect. Bruck will have to ensure departments release the names of officers found guilty of misconduct. Bruck may be the one to make a final decision on whether to ban police dogs.

Come January, whoever wins the governor's office will decide who begins, or continues, as the state's top law enforcement official.

The role can certainly affect every resident in the state. But perhaps nobody's life has been as dramatically altered by Grewal's office in the last few weeks as much as 34-year-old Taron Hill's.

Hill spent 16 years behind bars for a double murder before the conviction review unit, a new team formed under Grewal, re-investigated his case and concluded Hill was innocent.

Last week, he stepped outside New Jersey State Prison and into the arms of his daughter.

"I am grateful that this day has finally come," he said, his voice cracking. Then he implicitly called out Grewal's successors.

Other innocent men were still behind bars, he said. "I'm not only challenging the conviction review unit, but I'm challenging the entire justice system to get it right."

*NJ Advance Media staff writers S.P. Sullivan, Ted Sherman and Brent Johnson contributed to this report.*