

# Police get ‘seat at the table’ in House reform bill that reform advocates say doesn’t go far enough

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Police unions are getting a “seat at the table” in a reform bill unveiled by House leaders on Sunday, but civil rights and faith leaders criticized the legislation they say falls short on much-needed reforms in policing.

“This doesn’t go far enough,” said the Rev. Bernadette Hickman-Maynard, of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church in Lynn.

“Massachusetts police have a problem with violence and something must be done about it,” Hickman-Maynard continued, flanked by 11 other pastors from African Methodist Episcopal congregations around the state who gathered on the State House steps Monday urging House lawmakers to pass strong police reform legislation.

House leaders released their 129-page bill Sunday and it cleared the House Committee on Ways and Means without any dissent by Monday afternoon. The House bill comes on the heels of an expansive state Senate bill approved last Tuesday. Legislators are scrambling to seize onto the momentum of a national wave of protests calling for greater police accountability and pass reforms before the end of the legislative session on July 31.



Both bills would ban chokeholds and limit officers' use of force, requiring de-escalation and creating a duty to intervene. Both would create a Commission on the Status of African Americans to study and address structural racism and both would create independent commissions to oversee the training and certification of police officers, although the bills differ in their approach to staffing those boards.

The bills diverge in how they would address qualified immunity. The Senate version would limit use of the defense doctrine with a reasonableness clause, whereas it would be largely preserved in the House bill. In its version, only officers who are decertified would be at risk of personal liability.

Carol Rose, executive director of the ACLU of Massachusetts, said the House bill must include “fundamental change to protect the people who have been victimized by bad policing.”

Speaker of the House Robert DeLeo said in a statement that the bill keeps lawmakers' promises to address “structural inequalities that contribute to and are also a result of racial inequities.”

In a joint statement Senate President Karen Spilka, Sen. Sonia Chang- Díaz, and Sen. William Brownsberger said they are “pleased” the House included many of their reforms, but said they “look forward to working towards a final, stronger version of this bill.”

House leaders solicited public feedback before releasing their bill late on Sunday — receiving more than 1,000 testimonials, many from police officers, their families and unions pushing back on the Senate's bid to limit qualified immunity. The House bill quite

literally gives police a seat at the table, allowing police groups to nominate several members to sit on a seven-member certification commission.

“We have a seat at the table. It remains to be seen what that means, but it makes a huge difference when you have someone who has your perspective — the law enforcement perspective — and understanding at the table rather than a whole bunch of civilians,” said Boston Police Sgt. Eddie Chrispin, president of the Massachusetts Association of Minority Law Enforcement Officers.

Chrispin — along with other police advocacy groups across the state — has been vocal in his opposition of the Senate’s bid to limit qualified immunity, but said the House’s scaled-down version dealing with the doctrine that sometimes shields police from liability in court is “something he can live with.”

Scott Hovsepian of the Massachusetts Coalition of Police, who opposed the Senate bill said his organization is still reviewing the bill, noting “we are advocates for police reform, not obstacles to it.”