

# Police certification increases accountability

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The Massachusetts Coalition of Police (MassCOP) is working with Gov. Charlie Baker, the Legislature and the 157 communities that our 4,300 members serve and protect everyday to bring about constructive reform to policing and law enforcement across the state.

As the state moves toward a reform bill, we have repeatedly met with the administration and legislators, the NAACP, ACLU and the Black and Latino Legislative Caucus.

We agree with the governor and lawmakers on the need for a comprehensive process for certifying all police officers in Massachusetts. But we also believe that every Massachusetts police department should be held to the highest standards and best practices in law enforcement — and that is best accomplished through the accreditation process.

Certification increases accountability and requires officers to maintain professional standards at the highest level — enhancing public confidence. And having the confidence of Massachusetts citizens, including and especially communities of color, is critical for police officers as America experiences this period of reflection around social justice and racial equality.

Accreditation enforces a commitment to excellence in training and will standardize best practices for policing. Our leadership and members — the men and women sworn to protect Cape Cod and many other regions statewide — strongly support a process through which all municipal police departments become accredited utilizing the consistent standards of the Massachusetts Police Accreditation Commission.

Police officers have an important role, and responsibility, to play in the police reform movement. As professionals committed to protecting the public, who take pride in our profession, we believe proven cases of serious misconduct should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. We are not here to simply say ‘no.’

Rather, we want to ensure the reforms being sought enhance policing in Massachusetts.

To be clear: “Chokeholds” have not been an accepted practice in the commonwealth of Massachusetts for decades. Massachusetts police officers are not taught “chokeholds” in the police academy or veteran officer training. We support a ban on this tactic except in the extreme circumstance of the officer’s life or another person’s life in imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury.

The use of excessive force by police officers is unacceptable and we strongly support the proposed ban. And we support the Legislature's proposal that an officer has a duty to intervene if they witness excessive force. All these reforms require statewide training for officers.

Finally, we support creation of an independent body to oversee police standards and best practices. The board should include both law enforcement professionals and non-law enforcement professionals that have knowledge of policing.

These are sweeping reforms that we as police officers serving from Cape Cod to the Berkshires will strive to make work.

But as the Senate bill makes its way to the House our members want to make it very clear that the removal of "qualified immunity" for officers is both deeply unfair and potentially dangerous. It should not be considered as part of the final legislation.

The Senate removal of qualified immunity is a slap in the face to police and to our families.

This standard legal protection offered to nearly all government workers is, as the courts have repeatedly said, 'no license to lawless conduct' but a protection against losing your home and savings in a civil suit — even though an officer has acted in good faith and violated no law.

As we said in a recent letter to our congressional delegation, "Officers cannot operate effectively and safely if paralyzed with fear of liability."

Judges, prosecutors and members of Congress hold positions where they have far more time to make decisions, and don't face the prospect of death or injury if those decisions are not made quickly. Yet unlike police officers, they enjoy "absolute immunity." It is not too much to ask that officers continue to be able to act in good faith in their jobs without fearing that each decision could lead to a lawsuit.

As this state moves to enact reforms, don't throw out the basic union rights that police officers — like all members of organized labor — have earned in their workplace. Massachusetts is a proudly pro-union state. Taking away officers' rights to due process in their workplace is a quick way to concentrate too much power in too few hands, and prevent fair and equitable treatment of police.

*Scott A. Housepian is president of the Massachusetts Coalition of Police.*