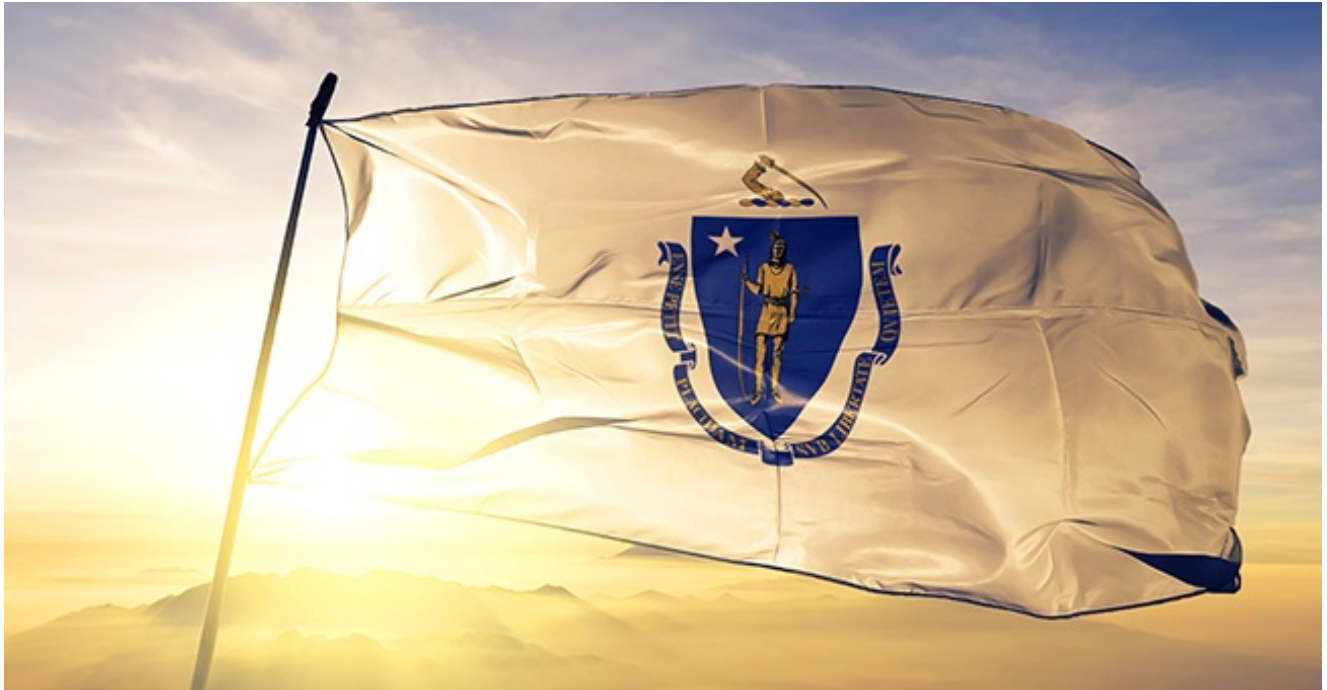


Massachusetts House Releases Extensive Police Reform Bill

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Massachusetts House leaders unveiled their version of a police reform bill Sunday night that would create the state's first-ever certification system for police, along with other controversial stipulations that have drawn outrage from police unions.

The bill was introduced by the House Ways and Means Committee Sunday night around 9:30 pm and House members were given until 10:00 am to speak on whether to recommend the 123-page bill to the entire House. There are only two weeks left of formal session before August recess, and given tension nationwide surrounding police brutality, the pressure is on both the state Legislature and Gov. Charlie Baker to implement some type of reform bill.

The announcement came just a week after the State Senate passed their own version of a police reform bill. The House plans to vote on their bill Wednesday.

These reform bills came nearly two months after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which has caused a racial reckoning across America.

The House called for a seven-person Massachusetts Police Standards and Training Commission that would “primary civil enforcement agency” in the state, according to the bill. The governor and attorney general would appoint and approve members to the proposed panel, with stipulations that some seats be reserved for law enforcement unions.

One of the most notable, impacting changes in the reform bill was curtailing this use of qualified immunity for police officers, which would mean civil lawsuits would be allowed to proceed if a police officer was aware that their behavior was in violation of the law.

Police unions have spoken out strongly against eliminating qualified immunity, arguing that qualified immunity protects officers and their families from superficial lawsuits. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) were largely in favor of curbing or eliminating such immunity, arguing that it consistently fails to hold police accountable for their actions.

The reform bill also suggested banning the use of facial recognition technology by government officials or agencies, unless given specific permission by law. This rule does not apply to the Registry of Motor Vehicles, as they need the face detecting software to be able to legally issue an individual a license or other state identification.

Also included in the reform bill are stipulations that prevent schools in the state from being able to report certain information to law enforcement regarding a student's ethnicity, religion, neighborhood, immigration status, or gang affiliation unless it's related to a specific incident. These restrictions were met with opposition in the state Senate with some lawmakers worrying that schools could potentially be safe harboring gang members, while others argued all students need to be able to attend school free from fear of being judged.

Chokeholds would also be banned under the legislation, and officers would be restricted from firing a weapon at a fleeing vehicle. The use of measures like tear gas, rubber pellets, or dogs to control unruly behavior, common measures seen throughout the nationwide protests, would be forbidden unless there were no other options to protect public safety and other tactics of deescalating the situation had been tried and failed. The execution of no-knock warrants would also be restricted.

The legislation would establish the right of citizens to "bias-free policing" and impose a duty for police to intervene if they are witness to misconduct by another officer.



Also incorporated in the bill are some changes to the governance of the State Police sought by Gov. Baker earlier in the year that would allow a governor to hire the colonel of the State Police from outside the department, among other revisions.

While they have yet to comment on the House's version of the bill, the Massachusetts

Coalition of Police released a statement regarding the Senate bill from the president of the union, Scott A. Hovsepian, who said he was "frustrated, confused, and angry" over the decision to pass the bill without the chance for law enforcement to weigh in on the matter.

However, Hovsepian said that the House will allow for hearings on their bill allowing police testimony on the reforms, leaving hope that law enforcement may be able to have a say in certain measures in the proposed legislation.