

Coalition on cop reform

Group calls for civilian review board in proposal

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Members of a new coalition aimed at implementing reform in policing on Long Island gathered Thursday on the steps of Nassau's legislative building to publicly offer up a draft of potential legislation to create local civilian complaint review boards.

The group, known as Long Island Advocates for Police Accountability, formed in the aftermath of the police custody death of unarmed Black man George Floyd in Minneapolis in May.

The fatal encounter has sparked a national outcry for equal justice that has reverberated on the streets of Nassau and Suffolk counties, leading to numerous protests that have jump-started dialogue about policing techniques and the relationship between the community and law enforcement.

Representatives of this 60-member group said they want to take that conversation a step further. Instead of just calling for police reform, they have fashioned legislation that could be adopted by local lawmakers to pave the way for independent, taxpayer oversight of the Island's police forces.

"The County of Nassau and the County of Suffolk have failed to take any real action to try and make things different with regard to policing. . . . So what we say is 'If you're not going to act, and you're not going to lead, we're going to show you the way,'" Hempstead civil rights attorney Frederick Brewington declared Thursday.

He pointed to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's executive order on police reform, which tells every local government with a police agency to review current deployments, policies and practices and develop an improvement plan to promote community engagement and address any racial bias.

The advocacy group that gathered Thursday in Mineola includes more lawyers, a former police officer, social workers and other professionals who are focused on addressing what ad-



Attorney Frederick Brewington introduces a plan for police reform in Mineola on Thursday.

vocates dubbed "the inequities of a broken system" when it comes to law enforcement's treatment of people of color.

The proposal would amend Nassau's charter and administrative code to create a civilian complaint review board with 11 appointed members, some named by the Legislature and some by the county executive, with a jointly appointed chair.

Board would have powers

The board would have to the power to investigate complaints from the public about alleged police misconduct. It also would be empowered to issue subpoenas, obtain evidence and interview witnesses before issuing findings and recommendations to Nassau Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder. Those recommendations could include penalties such as discipline, a psychological evaluation or more training depending on the severity of the substantiated allegations, according to the proposal.

Ryder then would either adopt the recommendation or explain in writing the reason for departing from it. The board would notify the complaining citizen of its findings and any actions by Ryder before a report would be filed with the county attorney. Those with substantiated complaints would become public, with some redactions

permitted, the draft says.

Ryder, in a statement later Thursday, said his department "has received police reforms handed down from Albany" and is in the process of addressing them. But the commissioner also seemed to push back on the idea of a review board.

"Our Police Department has a long history of working with the communities we serve, being transparent and investigating all complaints. I stand by the process that we have and the integrity of my investigators to obtain the evidence and find the truth," Ryder added.

Advocates for the police reform group stressed Thursday that their aim was not to exacerbate any divide between law enforcement and the community. They're planning next to release a similar draft for Suffolk.

"We are not standing here anti-police," said Rashmia Zatar, executive director of STRONG Youth, a Uniondale-based nonprofit focused on preventing gang violence.

Zatar alluded Thursday to what she called "the absurdity of our current policing system that does not acknowledge the humanity of our police officers" who don't get the monitoring and support they need to properly do their jobs.

"This is not an 'us versus them.' This is an 'us' issue,"

Zatar said.

Former NYPD Officer Dennis Jones said police need more training, including in de-escalation techniques, and that the public deserves better prepared, more professional officers.

County execs react

Nassau County Executive Laura Curran reacted later Thursday by saying in a statement that her administration is committed to moving the county forward "with positive reforms that improve public safety while building trust between police and the communities they serve."

She added: "I welcome constructive dialogue and look forward to engaging this group as part of Police And Community Trust (PACT), Nassau's new initiative bringing protest organizers and law enforcement together to listen and engage in frank conversations about community concerns."

County Executive Steven Bellone said Suffolk in the last few years has "made great progress in diversifying our police force and building community trust by embracing and instituting a number of reforms."

His statement also said the county "is working to develop a plan that builds upon this progress and modernizes police strategies."