

★ Activists: Plan isn't enough

They say Suffolk police reform proposal needs to address bias

BY RACHELLE BLIDNER

rachelle.blidner@newsday.com

Community activists and residents on Tuesday criticized Suffolk County's plan to overhaul police practices, saying the county's 1,000-page proposal does not go far enough in addressing racial and ethnic bias in policing or creating accountability for officer misconduct.

More than a dozen activists and residents spoke out on the Suffolk County Police Reform and Reinvention Task Force Draft Report at a legislative hearing.

They said the plan put forward by a task force created by County Executive Steve Bellone doesn't deal adequately with the causes of alleged police misconduct.

"The reality is, what you have in this plan is not going to work," said Frederick Brewington, a civil rights attorney who represents Christopher Cruz, the auto theft suspect shown being beaten recently by Suffolk officers on a video taken by a police body camera.

"It's going to create more problems, and it's not going to satisfy the needs of the people," said Brewington.

Bellone unveiled the task force's plan Thursday to satisfy Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's mandate that local governments in New York develop police reform plans by April 1 or risk losing state funding.

Cuomo's order came weeks after George Floyd's death in police custody in Minneapolis kindled months of nationwide protests over police killings.

Bellone said the county task force plan would create sweeping reform and seek to change the department's culture through expanded community policing and widespread use of body cameras.

Deputy Suffolk County Executive Vanessa Baird-Streeter, who chaired the task force, said drafting of the county plan involved collaboration with advocacy groups, community leaders, police unions, county officials and county residents to bring "true change and reform."

Baird-Streeter said the plan will expand civilian oversight of police and boost the role of mental health pro-

fessionals in responding to police 911 calls.

"Those are really initiatives that help to change the paradigm of how the police department operates," Baird-Streeter said in an interview.

Advocates for changes in county police practices have praised elements of the plan, including those that would end vehicle searches based solely on driver consent during traffic stops.

But they argued Tuesday that the county's adopted plan must establish an independent civilian oversight review board with the power to investigate complaints of misconduct and excessive force.

The county plan would give the Suffolk Human Rights Commission the power to oversee complaints over police conduct, but would leave investigations to police Internal Affairs.

Representatives of community groups including Long Island Network for Change and United for Justice in Policing LI urged county legislators Tuesday to adopt "The People's Plan."

The 310-page proposal outlines a more "holistic" approach to police reform than the county's, group representatives said Tuesday.

Some speakers at the hearing also cited an article in Newsday Tuesday that found the Suffolk County Police Benevolent Association Inc. contributes millions of dollars to campaigns in direct spending or through a related group the union controls despite restrictions on campaign spending.

Among recipients of donations from the Suffolk PBA political action committee in 2019 were Bellone, the Suffolk Democratic Committee, the county Republican Committee and county Legis. Leslie Kennedy (R-Nesconset), the story said.

"If you adopt the task force plan, many people will believe the police got what they paid for," said Lynn Kaufman, of LI United to Transform Policing & Community Safety. "You have a chance to show the public who you really work for: the public, not the police."

Cuomo's order required local governments to "consult with stakeholders, including but not limited to membership and leadership of the local police force."

A final legislative hearing on the police reform plans is scheduled for Thursday at 6 p.m.

The county Legislature is expected to vote on a reform plan at a meeting on March 30.