

Draft LCO #3471

An Act Concerning Police Accountability

My Name is Joseph Sikora, I live in Southington Connecticut, and I would like this posted for our legislative representatives to read as written testimony regarding my thoughts regarding the Police Accountability Bill Proposed in this special session, this date, July 17, 2020.

On Civilian Review Boards-The individuals that sit on civilian review boards would have to be highly trained individuals well versed in all laws and police department policies as they pertain to the Use of Force/Deadly Force. This would also require expert status in the Use of Force Continuum and the operation and appropriate use of all police tools (handcuffs, tasers, pepper spray, police batons, firearms) that are used in use of force situations. I am not optimistic that this would occur in all cities/towns. If they somehow have disciplinary authority in cases as opposed to making recommendations to the Chief of Police, we would be giving authority to a group outside of the Department who may not be as knowledgeable as the Chief and Command Staff regarding Police use of force. What effective organizations operate like that? I understand it is a Public Entity, but for any operation to run effectively, the experts in command positions must have the ultimate authority to make personnel and administrative decisions. I thought that is why we had government officials and ultimately the people, put them in those positions in order to make the hard decisions. I can see a Civilian Review Board making recommendations, but not having the ultimate authority in disciplinary cases regarding use of force.

Regarding the Use of and Return of Military Equipment-There are certain tactical situations that require armored vehicles and highly specific firearms and equipment that can be acquired at NO COST from the military. As a former SWAT Team member, we all volunteered to do this job in an effort to protect our citizens and each other. Although rare, there are hostage/rescue situations and active shooter situations where armored vehicles are essential for the safety of those doing the job. When you can drive up, and block rounds from coming at officers who can then rescue an injured citizen relatively safely and get them to a hospital quickly, it is paramount that we allow this equipment to be acquired and utilized. Without it, who would want to run across open space to rescue someone while under fire? I can tell you brave officers would, but who would tell their families that they were shot and or killed doing this when it could have been avoided by having the right equipment.

Certain rifles have a place in tactical situations. Criminals who shoot innocent citizens need to be addressed. Military type rifles are the best tool for the job. You want to give every tactical advantage to the Police, who are there to protect our citizens and in these situations, stop the life threatening action of these dangerous individuals. Banning and returning these tools puts those who took an oath to protect the citizens at a disadvantage. It should be an uneven playing field, with the advantage going to the police who protect our citizens. There is a vast array of military equipment that should be looked at and if the Chief of Police and the Department think it will benefit them, take advantage of the program and equipment that will keep our citizens safe.

As a side note, what if the military declines an effort to have police departments return equipment given to towns and cities. I am pretty confident this will be the case. Attempting this will be a lesson in futility and a waste of life saving resources.

Regarding the Mandate of Dashboard Cameras and Body Cameras for Police Vehicles and Officers. This is one of the more reasonable requests, but it comes at quite a cost. The big question is who pays for this. Can the state afford to outfit all officers in towns and cities with dashboard and body cameras? That is a big ask. Now we have storage and maintenance costs. When deep diving into this mandate, it is a very expensive proposition. Taxes will go up either from the state or local towns. The concept has some merit, but it could be stream lined perhaps for patrol functions, but the cost will still be significant. Is this the best use of our resources to outfit all officers and vehicles? This needs to be studied and adjusted a bit more before any implementation.

On Eliminate Qualified Immunity-This proposal will have a huge negative impact on Police Officers will and ability to do their job effectively. Would you put yourself out there and risk losing all you have and the ability to provide for your family when having to make a split second decision? What I believe will happen is Officers will not react decisively and this could lead to endangering their live and the citizens of our State. This could result in letting criminals and dangerous persons go in tense/life threatening situations. It will turn officers into a call answering service instead of aggressively seeking out dangerous persons and bringing them to justice. The result would be leaving the criminal on the street to continue to engage in dangerous criminal activity. They may be apprehended at a later time, but they are still out there to continue their dangerous activities. Who would want to confront them or put themselves in a situation that could negatively impact their lives forever without the protection provided by qualified immunity? Who would want to be in a position where the question is "If I use deadly force, could my family be at risk"?

It seems some major cities across the country have adopted this philosophy. Statistically, it appears gun violence has gone up in those cities and it appears there is not an end in sight. Without a different approach or a change in tactics, one would have to think they will continue to get similar results and dangerous behavior and gun violence will continue to increase. We do not want that to happen in Connecticut. Sometimes a proactive approach is required to stem violence. Without certain protections, I would think this would not occur.

I appreciate your consideration in these matters. We must insure that our Police Departments are adequately funded, protected, trained, and have the proper tools in which to do the job. This includes vehicles and tools similar to what the military uses. Our ultimate goal is to insure we have the best possible laws in place that protect our citizens and police officers, and improve the quality of life for all who reside in our great State. I would appreciate the support of our legislators regarding the points I have made in this written testimony.

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