



NASW

National Association of Social Workers / Connecticut Chapter

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Testimony on Police Accountability Bill

Judiciary Committee

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On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Connecticut Chapter we thank the Judiciary Committee for taking up the critically important work of rethinking how policing is performed in our state. NASW/CT supports the Police Accountability Bill as presented to the Judiciary Committee.

Police are not social workers. This may seem an obvious statement but it begs the question why are we dispatching police officers in response to situations that call for a social work intervention? Issues of drug use, homelessness, mental illness, non-violent domestic disputes, landlord/tenant disagreements and related social service issues too frequently lead to police responses. Tragically, as we have seen over and over, these calls lead to escalation instead of peaceful resolution and particularly when persons of color are involved harmful outcomes. If this were not the case, we would not be having calls for defunding the police and police reforms. Section 18 of the bill addresses this by requiring police departments to study and report on utilization of social workers. We recommend that this Section read licensed social workers in accordance with Chapter 383b of the CGS.

The hiring process and continuation of employment for police officers must be rigorous in terms of assessing the psychological suitedness of candidates to perform the job safely. Included in such screening must be an assessment of biases that may be cause for denial of hiring or continued employment. We support the requirement of a mental health assessment of officers every five years or sooner if determined to be necessary, or when an officer changes department. Police work is stressful so such assessment is critically important.

Adequate training must include anti-racism and bias training as listed in the bill. Such trainings must be performed periodically as one time is not going to be enough. Likewise, we support making sure that trainers are certified experts in their fields. Given that police are called upon to interact with persons with mental health illnesses, training on identification of mental health conditions is necessary. We do not expect police to become mental health experts but they need a basic understanding of how to address a person with mental illness. De-escalation training is also an essential component in police training. Such trainings should be required periodically throughout a police officers' career.

Other aspect of the bill that we strongly support:

- Annual reporting on minority recruitment efforts at local police departments.
- All police officers must become certified.
- Uniform officers must have name and badge number readily visible on outer most garment.
- Uniform standards will be developed for crowd control.
- Municipalities will have the ability to appoint citizen review boards and extend subpoena power to those review boards.
- Body and dashboard cameras will be mandatory for officers interacting with public.
- Tighten the type of military-grade equipment local municipalities can buy in an effort to de-militarize departments.
- An objectively reasonable standard will be required for an officer to use force, meaning that an officer has exhausted all reasonable alternatives, that the force creates no significant risk of injury to a third party, and that such use of force to be necessary.
- No tactic to restrain oxygen and blood flow to the head, including chokeholds and strangleholds, can be used unless it's deemed necessary to protect oneself or save the lives of someone else.
- Use of Force investigations would be conducted by an independent Inspector General with prosecutorial authority.
- Implement Increased penalties for making a false police report based on race, gender, national origin, sexual identity.

We recommend as a future step a comprehensive assessment of the allocation each municipality and state government provide to police departments to determine what the level of funding should be for police departments. A redirecting of first responders from police to social workers is a good initial step in reallocation of funds. The demilitarization of police departments is an excellent step as resources have gone into utilization of surplus military equipment that is appropriate for warfare, but not for policing in our communities. Reallocation of funding must go into community based social services care. Funds spent on violence prevention, fighting homelessness, delivering mental health services and preventative public health measures will strengthen communities and in the long run reduce the amount of active policing required. Such reallocation must include maximum involvement of residents of each community to assure that funds are utilized in ways that the community supports.

The Police Accountability bill is a strong step forward in making policing safer and more effective for all of our state's residents, not just those who are male, white and privileged. We urge the adoption of the Police Accountability bill.