



Testimony for the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

Wednesday, February 21st, 2024

SB 621 - County Police Accountability Boards – Investigation of Complaints of Police Misconduct

FAVORABLE

The ACLU of Maryland supports SB 621, which would explicitly authorize a local governing body of a county, including Baltimore City, by local law, to empower its police accountability board to exercise investigatory and subpoena powers. Only with this clarification can the Maryland Police Accountability Act of 2021 be implemented as intended and give communities truly meaningful oversight of police misconduct.

For decades, many jurisdictions in Maryland have advocated for community oversight of the police disciplinary process in response to the rampant police violence and corruption in their communities, which includes the authority to conduct independent investigations. However, the Law Enforcement Officers Bill of Rights impeded Maryland jurisdictions from establishing adequate community oversight due to provisions in the law that expressly prohibited investigations conducted by civilians from resulting in discipline (Pub. Safety §3-104(b)). This is why the efforts to repeal the law in 2021 received immense support from community members across the state.

Passed by General Assembly in 2021, the Maryland Police Accountability Act (MPAA) repealed the Law Enforcement Officer's Bill of Rights, replaced it with a new disciplinary framework, and mandated each county, including Baltimore City, to create a Police Accountability Board and Administrative Charging Committee. This landmark piece of legislation set up a basic framework for greater accountability, transparency, and community oversight in the police disciplinary process. Critical features of the board were left up to local jurisdictions, allowing them to establish the membership and budget and outline additional powers and procedures. However, due to confusion around the enabling legislation, local bodies erred on the side of caution and delayed empowering their PABs with the authority to conduct concurrent investigations into police misconduct complaints and issue subpoenas. SB 621

simply seeks to clarify that local governing bodies have the authority to grant their PAB's investigatory and subpoena powers.

Independent investigation of police misconduct is critical to meaningful accountability

Distrust in police is fueled by prevailing public opinion that police departments do not sufficiently hold officers accountable for misconduct. For instance, according to a national poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 86 percent of Black people and 65 percent of white people surveyed said that police departments do a poor or only fair job of holding officers accountable for misconduct.¹ Both the lived experience of police violence victims in Maryland and data from recent reports serve as substantive proof for these claims.

According to the Graham Report released in 2021, the Prince George's County Police Department routinely failed to adequately respond to internal and external complaints of racial harassment, discrimination, and misuse of force.² Additionally, a 2016 Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation into the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) revealed that BPD not only discouraged internal and external complaints but, even for serious misconduct allegations, complaints were routinely deemed "not sustained" for no reason. Of the 1,382 allegations of excessive force that BPD tracked from 2010 through 2015, only 31 allegations, or 2.2 percent, were sustained. According to the DOJ assessment, procedures to investigate these claims were both inconvenient to the public and wholly inadequate, falling below the department's own policies and law enforcement standards. Adequate discipline was persistently rare.³

For members of the public to trust the integrity of investigations into police misconduct complaints, PABs must be able to conduct investigations of their own to provide accurate assessments of complaints and their outcomes.

Giving PABs investigatory authority over some or all complaints is not inconsistent with police agencies also having that authority

¹ Pew Research Center. (2020, July 9). Majority of Public Favors Giving Civilians the Power to Sue Police Officers for Misconduct. Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/07/09/majority-of-public-favors-giving-civilians-the-power-to-sue-police-officers-for-misconduct/>

² Graham, M. E. (2020, August 28). Expert Report of Michael E. Graham in Hispanic National Law Enforcement Association NCR et al. v. Prince George's County et al.. Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.washlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HNLEA-v-PGC-Aug-28-Graham-Report-Unsealed.pdf>

³ U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. (2016, August 10). INVESTIGATION OF THE BALTIMORE CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT. U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/crt/file/883296/download>

The Baltimore City Civilian Review Board (CRB), created by a Public Local Law of the General Assembly, allows the CRB to conduct independent investigations of specific types of civilian complaints against officers in seven law enforcement agencies. Even though the agencies' own internal affairs units conduct parallel investigations, the CRB decides whether to investigate a complaint themselves or review the investigation of the internal affairs department. While the CRB has been limited in scope and authority prior to the MPAA, the independent investigations performed by the CRB staff have proven just how critical it is to have the option of conducting independent, civilian-led investigations into complaints. Beyond the increased trust and cooperation complainants show with CRB investigators, CRB and Public Integrity Bureau disagreed in 26% of concurrent investigations.⁴

The MPAA does not expressly prohibit PABs from having the power to investigate complaints independently

No provision in the MPAA prohibits local bodies from giving their boards these powers either in place of internal affairs or in parallel with them. Additionally, the MPAA does not have a preemption clause that would indicate the legislature's intention to bar the implementation of specific police accountability mechanisms, thereby precluding any local innovations or experimentation.

By affording the PABs with an opportunity to conduct independent investigations, PABs could provide a greater likelihood that investigations will be meaningful and that the public will trust their outcomes. For the forgoing reasons, the ACLU of Maryland urges a favorable vote on SB 621.

Respectfully,

Maryland Coalition for Justice & Police Accountability (members listed below)

ACLU of Maryland
ACLU of Maryland, Montgomery County Chapter
Amnesty International
Arts Education in Maryland Schools (AEMS) Alliance
Baltimore Action Legal Team
Baltimore Bern Unit
Baltimore City Civilian Review Board
Baltimore for Border Justice
Be More Unified

⁴ Baltimore City Office of Civil Rights. (2018, July). Baltimore City Civilian Review Board: Annual Report July 2017 to July 2018. City of Baltimore: Office of Equity and Civil Rights. Retrieved from <https://civilrights.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/CRB%20ANNUAL%20REPORT%20AUG%202018%20PUBLIC%20COPY.pdf>

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) - Maryland
CASA
Caucus of African-Americans Leaders
Citizens Policing Project
Coalition for Justice for Anton Black
Coalition of Concerned Mothers
Coalition of People Opposed Violence and Extremism
Common Cause Maryland
Community Actively Seeking Transparency (C.A.S.T.)
Community Justice
Court Watch & Judicial Accountability
Democratic Socialists of America – Baltimore City
Democratic Socialists of America – Greater Baltimore
Democratic Socialists of America – Prince George’s County
Disability Rights Maryland
Do the Most Good
Drug Policy Alliance
Equality Matters
For Kathy’s Sake
FreeState Justice
Greenbelt People Power
Helping Ourselves to Transform
Hispanic National Law Enforcement Association
Homeless Persons Representation Project
Innocence Project
InterFaith Action for Human Rights
Jews United For Justice
Ji'Aire's Workgroup Mental Health and Wellness
Justice Policy Institute
The JustUs Initiative
The Talking Drum
Kevin L. Cooper Foundation
Law Enforcement Action Partnership
Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle
League of Women Voters Maryland
LGBTQ Dignity Project
Life After Release
Making Changes LLC
Mama Sisterhood of Prince George’s County
March for Our Lives Maryland
Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform
Maryland Center on Economic Policy
Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition
Maryland Defenders Union

Maryland Justice Project
Maryland Office of the Public Defender
Maryland Poor People's Campaign
Maryland Prisoners' Rights Coalition
Maryland Restorative Justice Initiative
Montgomery County Civil Rights Coalition
Montgomery County Democratic Socialists of America
Mothers on the Move
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund
NAACP Maryland
National Coalition for Drug Legalization
Nigerian American Lawyers Association - Washington DC Chapter
Organizing Black
Our Maryland
Our Prince George's
Our Revolution Maryland
Power Inside
Prevent Gun Violence Ministry, River
Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Policy Foundation of Maryland
Prince George's People's Coalition
Prisons to Professionals
Progressive Maryland
Public Justice Center
Racial Justice NOW!
Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise (ROAR) Center at University of
Maryland-Baltimore
Reproductive Justice Inside
Sanctuary DMV
SEIU 1199
Showing up for Racial Justice, Annapolis and Anne Arundel County
Showing Up for Racial Justice, Baltimore
Showing Up for Racial Justice, Montgomery County
The Shriver Center at UMBC
Silver Spring Justice Coalition
Southern Maryland Poor People's Campaign
Takoma Park Mobilization
The Talking Drum Incorporated
The Women of Color for Equal Justice Law Center
West Wednesdays
Wicomico County NAACP Branch 7028
Young People for Progress

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