

OPINION

For effective policing, accreditation is key



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By **SCOTT HOVSEPIAN** |

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The important national conversation around policing reform has created an extended moment to reflect on, and an opportunity to improve, police training and standards in Massachusetts.

But a Senate bill approved on Beacon Hill at 4 a.m. July 14 was grossly deficient and harmful in several ways. It was also created through a process almost completely lacking in transparency or inclusion of important stakeholders.

The hope now is that a House version of comprehensive police reform being considered this week may do better in proposing positive change, enhanced policing standards and the preservation of officers' due process rights.

The Massachusetts Coalition of Police (MassCOP) is the largest union of police officers in the state, representing over 4,300 members sworn to protect and serve in 157 cities and towns. We are committed to bringing about constructive reform to policing and law enforcement in Massachusetts and ensuring public confidence in the professionalism of police officers and their respective departments.

Quite simply: Massachusetts police officers are advocates for police reform, not obstacles to it. Our hope is that a strong House bill that officers can support will emerge — balancing out the mistakes of the Senate and enabling a conference committee process that produces legislation Gov. Charlie Baker will be eager to sign.

We have been fortunate to engage in productive and positive discussions with Gov. Baker, the Black and Latino Legislative Caucus, other thoughtful House lawmakers and our fellow professionals within the Massachusetts Association of Minority Law Enforcement Officers and the Massachusetts Law Enforcement Policy Group. There is broad consensus and agreement on important measures such as the creation of an independent body to oversee officer certification, standardized training on police procedures and protocols, clear language banning chokeholds and the use of excessive force, a formalized “duty to intervene” responsibility for all officers, and the promotion of diversity and a commitment to recruiting more people of color into law enforcement.

It is our strong belief, however, that the foundation of all true reform must be established through accreditation of all municipal police departments as well as certification of all officers.

We agree with the governor and lawmakers on the need for a comprehensive process for certifying all police officers in Massachusetts. And we are encouraged that House members have recognized the need for police professionals to have a role in choosing true law enforcement experts to sit on a proposed independent certifying commission.

But we also believe that every Massachusetts police department should be held to the highest standards and best practices in law enforcement. Having the confidence of Massachusetts citizens, including and especially communities of color, is critical for police officers as America experiences this period of reflection around social justice and racial equality.

Accreditation enforces a commitment to excellence in training and will standardize best practices for policing. Our leadership and members — the men and women sworn to protect citizens and property in 157 communities — strongly support a process through which all municipal police departments become accredited utilizing the consistent standards of the Massachusetts Police Accreditation Commission. As it stands, fewer than 30% of all Massachusetts police departments are accredited. Within individual communities and as a commonwealth, we must do better.

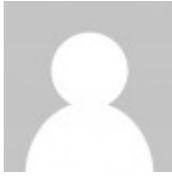
Certification holds each officer accountable within a fair and reasonable but high set of standards, and with the preservation of their due process rights. Similarly, accreditation for all municipal departments places organizational accountability squarely on each department: limited not only to rank and file officers and their direct supervisors, but extending to police chiefs, commissioners and all those officials with a direct influence on department leadership and culture. There can be no comprehensive reform of policing without a mechanism for accreditation of all departments.

Police officers have an important role, and responsibility, to play in the police reform movement. As professionals committed to protecting the public, we believe proven cases of serious misconduct should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and that officers should be held professionally accountable through certification. Once again, we are not obstacles to reform. We are advocates for it.

We urge police chiefs across the state — and their respective municipal leaders — to join us in advocating for strong reform by supporting accreditation for all departments as another important way to truly enhance policing in Massachusetts.

Scott Hovsepian is President of the Massachusetts Coalition of Police (MassCOP).

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