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Local

Civil rights groups push legislation on police transparency

By Brianna Rhodes|AP February 9 at 4:02 PM

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Maryland is one of the least transparent states regarding police misconduct complaints, civil rights advocates said in Annapolis this week.

The American Civil Liberties Union and CASA, a Latino and immigrant organization, as well as other civil rights groups on Wednesday announced support for legislation that would mandate transparency in police misconduct investigations in Maryland.

Delegate Erek Barron, D-Prince George's, and Sen. Joan Carter Conway, D-Baltimore, are sponsoring companion bills.

Currently in Maryland, if an individual files a complaint of police misconduct, they are not generally able to access information on how the department investigates or resolves it.

A member of the public is not able to access information because it is considered a "personnel record" under Maryland's Public Information Act, according to an ACLU Maryland report.

“If you file a complaint of police misconduct you have no right to know what level of thoroughness or diligence the department used when it investigated that case,” said Toni Holness, public policy director for ACLU Maryland.

A police department would be able to release the complaint file in some situations, and the complaint file would be removed from the personnel record category, if the legislation is passed.

Barron said the legislation should be passed in order for information to be released to complainants and for the community to help build trust with law enforcement.

“As a former prosecutor, you can’t have public safety without a partnership between law enforcement and the communities they serve and you can’t have partnership without trust,” Barron said. “Trust necessarily involves transparency and that’s what this bill is,” Barron said.

Members of the Coalition of Concerned Mothers and the Prince George’s People’s Coalition at a press conference Wednesday gave personal accounts of how they’ve been affected by the rule under Maryland’s Public Information Act, such as not having the ability to access information regarding their children’s deaths.

Marion Gray-Hopkins, president of The Coalition of Concerned Parents, an organization comprised of grieving mothers who lost children to community violence or police terrorism, lost her son Gary Hopkins Jr.

Hopkins Jr., a 19-year-old college student, was shot by a Prince George’s County police officer 17 years ago. The officer was tried and found not guilty in the teen’s death.

Hopkins said mothers of slain children should have the right to know information, and some have been relentless to make a change.

“What we are finding as citizens is that laws are protecting law enforcement and not protecting us,” Hopkins said. “This bill will be a way to regain that trust. We’re dealing with an administration that is saying that we’re going to bring back law and order. . If there’s nothing to hide, why not release the information?”

Burnett McFadden, a member of The Coalition of Concerned Parents, is the mother of three sons, Reginald, Randolph, and Linton McFadden, who all died in 2007.

McFadden said that the bill is very important in order for the community to feel safe and build relationships with officers.

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“It’s complicated now, because children are afraid...” McFadden said. “Today they are scared of officers that are in uniforms. You can’t call the police because you’re scared something is going to happen. We don’t want that. We want to feel comfortable.”

Councilman Brandon Scott, D-Baltimore, was also in attendance in support of the legislation. Scott said he believes that the legislation, along as other initiatives, such as training officers, will help the city of Baltimore.

“This year, 500 police officers are going (through training with) Community Mediation, a grassroots organization with young people--with teenagers because that’s where we know where the problems are,” Scott said.

Twenty-seven other states make the release of complaint files more accessible to the public -- even more conservative ones such as Alabama, Georgia and Arizona. In those states, police disciplinary records are normally available to the public, except in active investigations, according to an ACLU report.

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