

January 2, 2024

The Hon. Speaker Joseph Shekarchi
The Hon. President Dominick Ruggerio
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Speaker Shekarchi and President Ruggerio:

As organizations deeply committed to racial justice, police reform, and equity in the exercise of criminal justice, we write to you at the start of the 2024 state legislative session to urge that this be the year the General Assembly takes action on bills introduced over the past three years that are aimed at promoting better police-community relations.

After the national Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, state legislatures across the country rapidly enacted statutes which, among other critical policies, outlawed certain types of use of force like chokeholds and prioritized accountability and transparency in police work. Rhode Island certainly was not an outlier in the introduction of these bills, and many of our organizations have consistently testified in strong support of the reforms that such legislation would implement. However, in spite of strong community and organizational support – and contrary to the swift action taken by dozens of states across the country to address these issues – Rhode Island’s only substantive reform bill passed in these successive years has been the establishment of a statewide body-worn camera program. While we do not discount this effort and are appreciative of the work put in by the legislature to enact this statute, it is impossible not to contextualize this action within the comprehensive reforms made elsewhere in the country.

To give just a few examples:

- We have failed for three legislative sessions to reinstate a statute that had expired in July of 2020 which requires the collection and analysis of traffic stop data for evidence of racial profiling, a law which many other states have adopted.¹ Rhode Island, which was the first state to pass such a law back in 2000, now lags behind.
- The General Assembly has heard legislation since 2021 which would address and restrict on a statewide level certain types of use of force by police officers, but the legislation has died in committee each year since. In the meantime, 24 states in the period of time between May 2020 and October 2021 *alone* statutorily either restricted or banned the use of neck restraints in the course of policing.²
- We are one of only two states in the country that does not have a decertification mechanism for officers who have engaged in misconduct, and bills to end that distinction have died in committee.

¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/traffic-stop-data>

² <https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/law-enforcement-legislation-significant-trends-2021#:~:text=New%20in%202020%20and%202021,to%20report%20or%20document%20incidents>. While state and municipal police *policies* may restrict the use of chokeholds, that is no substitute for a statutory ban that contains specific remedies for their misuse.

- Efforts through legislation to promote greater public accessibility to police department findings of misconduct by its officers have been stymied even as other states have opened up these records.

We acknowledge and appreciate your public comments that 2024 will finally be the year that the General Assembly makes some reforms to the most protective Law Enforcement Officer Bill of Rights in the country – and the only state in New England with such a law in any form. But we believe it would be a mistake to view partial reform of the LEOBOR statute alone as a sufficient response to the legitimate advocacy for broader police reform that we and so many others have actively sought and that remains urgently needed.

Given the vast number of reforms we have seen across the country, and the dearth of progress on these crucial bills in our state, we write to urge you and your colleagues to prioritize policies addressing policing practices, above and beyond LEOBOR, during this upcoming session. The importance of their adoption cannot be overstated. We hope that, especially as we near the four-year anniversary of the profound Black Lives Matter protests that highlighted so many of these issues, they will be as central to your platform this session as they are to ours.

Should you have any questions, or wish to further discuss ways to address matters relating to racial justice, policing practices, or criminal justice reform, our organizations stand ready to assist. Thank you very much in advance for your time and your work on these important policy goals, and we look forward to continued work together.

Sincerely,

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Governor Daniel McKee
Sid Wordell, Rhode Island Police Chiefs Association