

Md. Lawmaker's Bill Calls for Transparency in Police-Involved Deaths

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FULL TEXT

ANNAPOLIS - A Maryland delegate has introduced a bill to enact new standards of transparency in investigations of police-involved fatalities after a pair of high-profile deaths of two African-American men last year.

HB 1011, or "Anton's Law" - introduced by Del. Gabriel Acevero (D-Montgomery) and named after Anton Black, a Black teen who died in September while in police custody in Caroline County - would create a uniform citizen complaint process with the Maryland Police Training and Standards Commission, a sub-agency of the Public Safety and Correctional Services.

In Acevero's Montgomery County, Robert Lawrence White, an unarmed 41-year-old African-American man in Silver Spring, was shot dead by a county police officer in June. The officer was cleared of any wrongdoing.

"While the Commission is required to share with complainants the results of citizen-initiated complaints, there is currently no requirement that the Commission share any documentation related to the investigation, or even whether prior complaints may have been lodged against the officers implicated in such investigations," Acevero said in a press release.

The bill had its first hearing Tuesday in Annapolis, with more than 30 co-sponsors in the Maryland House, primarily from Baltimore City, Montgomery and Prince Georges counties, along with Del. Sheree Sample-Hughes (D-Dorchester and Wicomico), the lone member of the Eastern Shore delegation in support of the legislation.

After introductory remarks from Acevero urging a "favorable report" on the bill, LaToya Holley-Blacks older sister, shared recollections of her brother's impact within his family and community.

Ahead of the hearing, the Maryland Chiefs of Police Association (MCPA) and Maryland Sheriffs Association submitted a joint letter opposing the legislation. Ismael Vince Canales, president of the Maryland Fraternal of Police, representing more than 20,000 law enforcement officers, and John Fitzgerald, chief of the Chevy Chase Police Department and MCPA officer, testified in opposition to the bill.

Following impassioned remarks from Del. Debra M. Davis (D-Charles County) in support of the bill, members of the audience, including family and teenage friends of Anton Black, were asked to hold their applause

Traveling to Annapolis from Caroline County, Christina Robinson attended the hearing with high school students who volunteered alongside Black to complete community service projects in the small town of Greensboro, where the public library is only open four days a week.

In testimony submitted to the committee in support of the bill, Robinson wrote, "The lack of information in the wake of these officer-involved incidents can contribute to tension and division within communities." Robinson added that a lack of disclosure can "lead to speculation, conspiracy theories, distrust in the law enforcement establishment and the legal process as a whole."

Del. Robin L. Grammer Jr. (R) of Baltimore County expressed displeasure that after seeking information for months, the family of Anton Black received the autopsy report and public release of body-camera footage within three days of remarks about the incident by Republican Gov. Larry Hogan.

Fatigued from the previous day's judiciary committee proceedings reaching into the early morning, legislators on Tuesday expressed a bipartisan desire to review the law, encouraged by Acevero's willingness to offer amendments.

Republican legislators from the Eastern Shore delegation expressed a need for more information on the bill before making a commitment of support.

"I want to wait to take a position on this bill until after the public process and after all of the stakeholders have had a chance to weigh in on Anton's Law," said Del. Jeff Christ (R-36), who represents four counties on the Shore including Caroline.

Sample-Hughes said the legislation has not yet been discussed by members of the Eastern Shore delegation at their weekly Friday caucus meetings, but hopefully would be discussed at this week's meeting.

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