

EDITORIAL: Everyone should be at table in police discussions



Police watch the street as protesters gather outside the Ferguson Police Department in Ferguson, Mo.

CHARLIE RIEDEL — AP

The demonstrations last year against police violence sparked by the deaths of unarmed civilians in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City are long gone. But their spirit lives on in California's Capitol.

So far there are several legislative efforts to change how officer-involved deaths are handled and how police interact with the public. There's a bill by Pomona Assembly Member Freddie Rodriguez that would require police to report annually to the state Department of Justice when an officer is shot or when an officer shoots someone, not just when someone dies in custody.

One promising bill, AB 86 by Sacramento Assembly Member Kevin McCarty, would fundamentally alter how investigations of officer-involved deaths are conducted by creating an independent law enforcement review panel.

Typically, when someone dies at the hands of police, the local district attorney will handle the case and decide whether to prosecute. Because prosecutors and police officers are essentially colleagues, it raises questions about whether investigators are as impartial as they ought to be.

McCarty was inspired by the story of Michael Bell, a father in Wisconsin whose 21-year-old son was shot point blank in the head during a drunken scuffle with police officers in 2004. The case was dismissed after a cursory examination by department investigators.

A civil suit did find the officers liable and the Bell family was awarded \$1.75 million, which Michael Bell used to finance a grassroots campaign to reform the way cases of officer-involved deaths are handled. It took about 10 years, but his persistence won over the state legislature and Gov. Scott Walker, who signed a bill last year requiring an independent review panel.

AB 86 is little more than a sketch at the moment, so it's impossible for us to judge its merits. McCarty said he kept the language deliberately vague so the details could be filled in during the hearing process as legislators, law enforcement and civil rights groups hammer out a system that works better.

That's a smart way to start with legislation that's sure to face stiff opposition from law enforcement agencies and their allies. Moreover, legislators have a responsibility to their constituents to make sure that police violence is adequately addressed. But law enforcement absolutely must be part of the discussion, which won't happen if they just say no.

There well may be more legislation related to police shootings before the Friday filing deadline. If so, we'd like to see one that improves data collection of incidents in which people die at the hands of police. There is almost no data now, a fact which has dismayed even law enforcement officials.

We agree that improved data is essential and hope that lawmakers can make it happen by setting reporting standards and requirements for every agency in the state to follow.

This doesn't have to be a police vs. the public discussion, and it shouldn't be. Everyone benefits by better policing, and everyone should be at the table.

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