

Washington communities need HB 1445

When a community's law enforcement agency or jail is engaged in a pattern or culture of unconstitutional or unlawful policing, discrimination, or any type of systemic misconduct, Washingtonians need a place to turn to for help. House Bill 1445, the Attorney General's Civil Rights Investigations & Reform bill, can be that help.

The bill gives the Washington Attorney General's Office tools to investigate and hold accountable police departments and jails for constitutional and state law violations. It's similar to the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) power to investigate departments for a pattern of misconduct, but because the DOJ doesn't have capacity to investigate every department engaged in wrongdoing, House Bill 1445 provides a needed backstop. Communities cannot afford to wait for relief.

SNOHOMISH COUNTY:

Juan Peralez is president of Unidos, which works to strengthen trust between the community and law enforcement in Snohomish County. That goal faced challenges during the tenure of former Snohomish County Sheriff Adam Fortney, as Peralez and others in the community had concerns about the department's culture. They worried Fortney and the department showed favoritism to those with extremist views. As sheriff, Fortney drew criticism for, among other things: reinstating deputies who had been fired for a warrantless car search; his handling of an incident where armed vigilantes gathered to protect businesses from imagined Antifa violence; and hosting a fundraiser with a speaker who has ties to the extremist "constitutional sheriffs" ideology, which suggests that sheriffs are the supreme power in their counties and may ignore laws they disagree with. These types of incidents, which undermine community trust, would receive more scrutiny under HB 1445. Peralez, who supported the new Snohomish County sheriff's campaign, says the bill can help fix department culture.

"IT [HB 1445] WILL HOPEFULLY BUILD TRUST IN OUR COMMUNITIES...IF THEY START INVESTIGATING INCIDENTS THAT HAVE HAPPENED ALL ALONG."
– JUAN PERALEZ

KING COUNTY:

Lalita Uppala is the executive director of Indian American Community Services (IACS), which provides support, advocacy and services to Western Washington's Indian American community. IACS called for transparency and accountability from the Seattle Police Department (SPD) after an SPD officer struck and

killed 23-year-old Jaahnavi Kandula last year, and audio was released of another officer laughing and mocking her death. In a separate mocking incident, officers displayed a fake tombstone for Damarius Butts, another person of color killed by SPD officers. The two incidents make Uppala question if the department has a culture issue and if a department that mocks victims can be trusted to maintain public safety.

"THIS KIND OF A BILL WOULD INFORM US, THE COMMUNITY, THAT WE HAVE REPRESENTATION. THAT WE CAN MAKE THOSE ASKS AND THAT THERE IS AN OUTSIDE AGENCY THAT CAN STEP IN AND ASK FOR ACCOUNTABILITY."

– LALITA UPPALA

CLARK COUNTY:

Nickeia Hunter is the vice president for the NAACP of Vancouver and Clark County. After Vancouver Police killed her brother Carlos Hunter in 2019, Nickeia sought answers when law enforcement refused to provide her with any. In 2021, Nickeia and the NAACP were part of a group who called on the DOJ to investigate Vancouver Police and Clark County Sheriff's Office, citing a pattern of excessive force, disparate policing, and favoritism toward known white supremacist extremist groups. Despite providing the DOJ with what Nickeia called an "iron clad, almost leak proof" case, the government hasn't responded in over two years. The harm, without intervention, persists.

"HAD WE HAD THE AG BILL [HB 1445], THE CASE THAT WENT TO THE DOJ WOULD'VE BEEN SO MUCH MORE [QUICKLY] RECEIVED, AND THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO REALLY START DIGGING INTO IT."

– NICKEIA HUNTER