

Statement from U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren on S. 2820
“An Act to Reform Police Standards and Shift Resources to Build a More Equitable, Fair and Just Commonwealth that Values Black Lives and Communities of Color”
July 17, 2020

Thank you to the House Ways and Means and Judiciary Committees for the opportunity to submit testimony for your virtual hearing. I share your profound concerns about the racist violence that continues to plague our country and commend the Massachusetts Legislature for beginning the difficult work of dismantling deep-rooted systemic racism in the Commonwealth.

The recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many other Black men and women have sparked protests across the country, as communities demand an end to the police brutality, racist violence, and discrimination that has resulted in the deaths of countless Black people. We say their names to reaffirm the simple but powerful truth that they mattered. Their lives mattered. And Black lives matter.

This moment calls for us to fundamentally change how we think about public safety by transitioning away from a punitive system of locking people up and instead investing in community services that lift people up. It starts with a complete transformation of policing in America: our leaders at both the state and federal level have a duty to respond by passing laws that confront police brutality and systemic racism in the U.S. That begins with real accountability for anyone—including law enforcement officers—responsible for unjustified killings, including by ending qualified immunity to allow lawsuits against police officers and departments that violate people’s constitutional rights. We need real oversight when people are tragically killed by law enforcement - victims’ family members and communities should be able to trust that the process to find justice isn’t rigged from the outset. Independent investigations and prosecutions help accomplish that goal. We also need standards on the use of force that ban practices that too often result in unnecessary damage and death, including chokeholds and no-knock warrants. We must also ban racial and religious profiling and work to demilitarize our police departments.

The Reform, Shift + Build Act passed by the State Senate earlier this week takes an important step towards confronting racist violence and dismantling systemic racism in Massachusetts. The legislation would reform police standards, shift resources to communities, and lay the foundation for a more equitable, just, and fair system of public safety. Importantly, this bill increases law enforcement accountability by limiting qualified immunity for police officers, outlines a new vision of public safety for Massachusetts by demilitarizing the police force, addresses the school-to-prison pipeline, and expands community-based, non-police solutions to crisis situations. The bill contains many much-needed reforms that will bring meaningful change to policing in Massachusetts.

States and municipalities can’t do this important work alone - that’s why I am fighting for many of the same reforms at the federal level. I am an original cosponsor of Senators Booker and

Harris' Justice in Policing Act, a bill that would make substantial changes to policing in America, including several of the provisions included in the Reform, Shift + Build Act. In addition to the Justice in Policing Act, Senators Durbin, Hirono, and I introduced the Enhancing Oversight to End Discrimination in Policing Act, a bill to strengthen the federal and state governments' ability to investigate police departments with a pattern or practice of unconstitutional and discriminatory behavior. I have also introduced the Andrew Kearsse Accountability for Denial of Medical Care Act, a bill to hold law enforcement officers criminally liable for failing to obtain medical assistance for people in custody experiencing medical distress.

But let's be clear - this is not only about our criminal justice system. We must root out racial disparities in every part of our society, including in our healthcare system, our educational system, our housing policies, and in the workplace, and I am fighting to do just that. I led my colleagues in introducing the American Housing and Economic Mobility Act to confront America's housing crisis and take the first steps to address the effects of decades of housing discrimination on communities of color. I introduced the Student Loan Debt Relief Act, which would cancel student loan debt for 42 million Americans and take meaningful steps to begin to close the Black-White and Latinx-White wealth gaps while increasing wealth for Black and Latinx families, who face the worst effects of the student loan debt crisis. I've also cosponsored the Maternal Care Access and Reducing Emergencies (CARE) Act to address the racial disparities in maternal mortality rates.

I will continue to fight at the federal level to take tangible steps toward breaking apart the systems that have stolen countless Black and Brown lives and denied Black Americans and other people of color opportunity and equal treatment. I'm proud to stand alongside Massachusetts legislators who are taking meaningful steps to transform policing in the Commonwealth. I am deeply grateful for your leadership and look forward to our continued partnership on this critical issue.