




CRIMINAL JUSTICE

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Activists call for federal oversight of N.J. State Police over racial discrimination allegations

BY: SOPHIE NIETO-MUNOZ - JULY 12, 2023 6:35 AM



 Lawyers sent a letter Tuesday to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland requesting the Department of Justice investigate the New Jersey State Police in light of "an alarming number of internal complaints and lawsuits." (Photo by Jamie Squire/Getty Images)

Allegations of systemic racial discrimination – including claims of racist taunts and Black officers being passed over for promotions – are pushing prominent Black activists to call for federal oversight of the New Jersey State Police.

During Tuesday's [meeting](#) of the NAACP New Jersey State Conference, national leaders and local advocates demanded the U.S. Department of Justice investigate the State Police, called on state Attorney General Matt Platkin to address allegations of discrimination within the agency, and asked Platkin to release a report on an investigation his office launched nearly three years ago into the State Police's hiring and promotional practices.

"It's time to put a stop, it is time to put a finish, and more than any saying about accountability, I believe the U.S. Justice Department should take over the New Jersey State Police," said the Rev. Jethro James of Paradise Baptist Church in Newark.

Citing Platkin's [March takeover of Paterson's police department](#), James added: "If the attorney general can stand and say they took over Paterson for its problems, how do you behave when you don't clean your own house?"

The activists' demands come about three months after two Black troopers, Lt. Damon Crawford and Major Brian Polite, filed a lawsuit against the agency alleging racist workplace harassment, discrimination, and retaliation.

In [the lawsuit](#), the men claim Polite was wrongly passed over for promotions in favor of less qualified candidates, they faced retaliation, and they had racist comments directed at them, including by one person who was later promoted. The lawsuit also alleges that a white captain referred to Polite as the "HNIC," meaning the "head N-word in charge," attorneys at Tuesday's press conference said.

Attorneys Michelle Douglass and Gregg Zeff represent nearly two dozen troopers who allege they are victims of discrimination. The oldest case dates back to 2016, and the attorneys say they're frustrated by how slowly the cases are winding through the courts.

They sent [a letter](#) Tuesday to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland requesting the Department of Justice pursue an investigation in light of "an alarming number of internal complaints and lawsuits." The letter was co-signed by nine activists.

State Police hiring practices disproportionately favor "white heterosexual males and which in turn empowers this favored group to make unacceptable and outward racist, sexist, and homophobic comments towards minority members within the workplace," they wrote.

According to the letter, around 84% of the state's 3,181 troopers are white males, despite minorities accounting for nearly half of the state's population. They also say women make up just 3% of the force.

They say the lawsuits' allegations portray a work environment akin to an "old boys club" that promotes white men with histories of drunk driving and harassment charges over qualified minorities, promotions "condoned" by State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan.

While Douglass questioned Callahan's leadership, the speakers at Tuesday's press conference fell just short of calling for his ouster.

“We’re certainly not opposed to whatever remedy makes this work. Whether that’s a takeover, a consent decree – it has to be something different because clearly whatever’s happened so far hasn’t worked,” Zeff said in an interview with the New Jersey Monitor. “We’re looking to make State Police look like New Jersey.”

The attorneys want Platkin’s office to release materials from an investigation launched in August 2020 and conducted by the Kaufman Dolowich Voluck law firm. The Attorney General’s Office hired the firm to investigate discrimination in hiring and promotions, [according to NJ.com](#).

Spokespeople for the State Police, Attorney General’s Office, and U.S. Department of Justice did not respond to requests for comment.

Platkin on Tuesday announced that independent researchers will monitor state troopers’ traffic stops after a study found “concerning” racial and ethnic disparities in who police stop on the state’s roadways.

There is a history of federal officials investigating the State Police’s practices. For 10 years starting in 1999, an outside monitor oversaw the agency over charges that state troopers racially profiled motorists. In 1998, troopers [shot at a van with four Black men inside](#), wounding three, an episode that sparked a national debate over police use of force and racial profiling.

When federal oversight ended in 2009, the monitor said the agency had transformed in the prior 10 years. Zeff said little has changed.

“25 years ago, they were supposed to do things – they’re still not doing them,” Zeff said.

Lawrence Hamm, an organizer with the People’s Organization for Progress, said Tuesday that “racism in the department has proven to be very intractable” and that there’s an obvious need for additional guardrails against racism, sexism, and bias inside the agency.

“It’s very disheartening to see that we are here in the 21st Century and it’s starting to feel like we’re back in the 1960s,” Hamm said. “Tomorrow will be 56 years since the Newark uprisings, and people are still talking about the racism within the New Jersey State Police.”

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SOPHIE NIETO-MUNOZ  

Sophie Nieto-Muñoz, a New Jersey native and former Trenton statehouse reporter for NJ.com, shined a spotlight on the state's crumbling unemployment system and won several awards for investigative reporting from the New Jersey Press Association. She was a finalist for the Livingston Award for Young Journalists for her report on PetSmart's grooming practices, which was also recognized by the New York Press Club. Sophie speaks Spanish and is proud to connect to the Latinx community through her reporting.

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