



Chicago council considers Emanuel's plan for police probes

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The Chicago City Council on Wednesday approved Mayor Rahm Emanuel's plan to create a new agency to investigate police shootings and misconduct allegations even as critics say it's not strong enough to keep a close eye on a police force with a reputation for brutality.

After months of community hearings, the new agency will replace the Independent Police Review Authority, which was discredited by long delays in completing investigations that nearly always sided with officers. The council vote was 39-8.

"This is far from perfect but it shows we want to move forward," said Alderman Ariel Reboyras. "It is a great step in the right direction."

Emanuel has been under pressure to strengthen oversight of the police since the release of a video in December last year showing the 2014 death of Laquan McDonald, a black teenager shot 16 times by a white police officer. The video sparked repeated protests and calls for Emanuel to resign. The officer was eventually charged with murder.

Emanuel said on Tuesday that the creation of the agency is critical to restoring trust between the Chicago Police Department and the city's residents.

"Our residents and our officers deserve certainty about the disciplinary process, and it is up to us to ensure the right tools are in place for thorough and timely investigations of complaints against officers," he said.

But critics of the proposal said it doesn't provide enough funding and hinges on a hiring requirement for attorneys that could promote conflict of interest.

"No matter how many tears Rahm Emanuel sheds at press conferences, if he is unwilling to promote the substantive changes we demand, the world will know that he is only feigning compassion for communities of color that continue to be victimized by those sworn to serve and protect them," said Brenda Sheriff, of the NAACP's Chicago Southside Branch.

Under the proposal, the new board will investigate shootings, incidents when officers used Tasers, allegations of physical and psychological coercion of witnesses by officers, as well as allegations that officers conducted improper searches or denied access to attorneys for people suspected of crimes. And the new board would have to complete its investigations within six months or offer an explanation to the mayor and others.

It would prohibit the new agency from hiring as investigators anyone who has been a Chicago police officer within the last five years — an effort to satisfy reform advocates who worried that people who were recently on the force may not aggressively investigate police officers.

One national expert said once the board is created, the public may remain suspicious if the members are selected by city officials.

"The average person doesn't know who these people are, whether they are trying hard or just stooges for people in city government," said Tim Lynch, who directs the Cato Institute's project on Criminal Justice that has studied extensively and written about civilian review boards.

Critics also singled out a provision in the ordinance that calls for the new agency to hire its own attorneys from a list of five law firms previously approved by the city's law department.

"These law firms ... may have other business with the city, its law department, so there may be some explicit or implicit conflict of interest there," said Lynch.

Samuel Walker, who teaches criminal justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and has researched police oversight boards nationwide, said looking outside the city or even the state to fill posts at the new agency could help ensure evenhandedness and objectivity.