



Competing Mississippi ‘Blue Lives Matter’ bills have key differences

Steve Wilson

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If the Mississippi Legislature reaches a critical compromise, violent crime against law enforcement and first responders such as firefighters and paramedics would be punished more severely.

Critics charge that a “Blue Lives Matter” law is unnecessary in the Magnolia State, especially if it adds first responders to the state’s hate-crime statute.

There are two bills with key differences in the Legislature. The Senate version, called the “Blue, Red and Med Lives Matter Act,” passed the full chamber Thursday on a 37-13 vote. It would add law enforcement, firefighters and paramedics to the state’s existing hate-crime law. A conviction under the hate-crimes statute results in doubled prison sentences and fines and can be applied to both felonies and misdemeanors.

The House version would not use the hate-crime statute as its vehicle and also adds utility workers under its protections.

The “Back the Badge Act,” approved Thursday by the House Judiciary B Committee, adds extra penalties for violent crime against police, firefighters, paramedics and utility workers “acting in their official capacity” to the state’s crimes against persons statutes. Those laws cover crimes such as murder, assault, rape and kidnapping.

The House bill also would make the murder of a firefighter, paramedic or utility worker a capital crime, which requires the death penalty for a conviction. Such is already the case for the murder of law enforcement officers.

State Rep. Andy Gipson, R-Braxton, chairs the House Judiciary B Committee. He says his committee’s bill avoids the pitfalls of tying added penalties for violent crimes against first responders to the state’s hate-crime law. He also says the House bill will be an effective deterrent against those seeking to do harm against first responders.

“I’ve heard concerns [about] the hate-crimes statute from folks on the left and the right,” Gipson said. “My point with this bill is, let’s put that issue aside. Let’s focus on the issue at hand, which is law enforcement officers. This version is preferable to me because I don’t want us to get distracted. We want to emphasize our support for law enforcement in the state of Mississippi and that’s our No. 1 priority.”

With such large differences between the bills, a compromise in conference will have to be made once the bills head to the opposite chamber.

‘A really terrible idea’

Walter Olson is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies. His blog, Overlawyered, details the high costs of the U.S. legal system. The legal scholar says adding penalties for violent crimes against police is one thing, but using hate-crime laws as the vehicle for it is problematic.

“There is nothing new or unusual about enacting [added] penalties for physical interference with, or attacks on, first responders or police,” Olson said. “A law like that can be debated on its own merits. What is new and a really terrible idea is using hate-crime laws as a way of doing so.”

Olson also said that altercations with officers during arrests don’t arise from prejudice against police as a group, much like a racial or religious form of prejudice.

“By pretending that it does, we promote the idea that police are somehow an oppressed group in today’s America, which is ridiculous,” Olson said. “We feed the idea that there is some sort of big conspiracy to attack them, even though attacks on police were much more common in the 1970s and 1980s than they are now.”

Gov. Phil Bryant said in his State of the State speech last week that he would support passage of a Blue Lives Matter bill, but didn’t specify which direction he favored.

While other states have passed laws with added penalties for violent crimes against police officers, Louisiana was the first to add law enforcement to its hate-crimes law. The Louisiana Legislature passed its Blue Lives Matter law in May, making any violent crime against a law enforcement officer a hate crime.