

JUSTINE LAUREN RICHARDS

July 16, 2020

The Honorable Charlie Baker
Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Office of the Governor, Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

I ask that you veto the "Reform, Shift + Build Act", S.2800/S.2820, a bill that was ramrodded through the State Senate in a 4 am vote Tuesday morning. Deliberately avoiding any input from police unions, police departments or any minority police associations, the Senate has in essence begun the process of eliminating the Commonwealth's greatest workforce- our police officers with secondary implications aimed at our firefighters and teachers.

The provisions of the bill mandate that individuals employed in the three most important sectors of the Commonwealth now be required to place their lives and all tangible assets on the line when they begin work each day. To not offer police officers and firefighters the Qualified Immunity that each one deserves is not only retaliatory but is the most egregious signal that those professions are now considered persona non grata.

Leaving the Qualified Immunity coverage to municipalities ensures three things- a catastrophic loss of jobs in the Commonwealth across the board, an overwhelming increase in taxes and weaker bodies of law enforcement. Cities and towns will be forced to eliminate positions because the insurance premiums they will now have to cover for police, fire and teachers will skyrocket, forcing financial expenditures and result in jobs eliminated. Additionally, the endless legal fees cities and towns will have to absorb threaten to bankrupt municipalities. The bill is a jackpot for trial attorneys, however, as it ensures that attorney fees are now to be awarded to plaintiffs. The 1-2 punch of increased insurance premiums with unknown costs for legal protection without a doubt will proliferate property taxes.

This Trojan Horse of a bill is a total job killer. Cutbacks in personnel will affect every city and town department; municipalities which are less affluent will be the hardest hit, not just with layoffs but with a drastic increase in crime since no measures will be in place to effectively deter or address criminal activity. I do not believe any police officer or firefighter will continue to work without the Qualified Immunity protection he or she was promised at the start of their careers. They should not be forced to go without it in 2020, especially when every single legislator and member of the State Executive branch enjoys mandatory defense and indemnification for civil rights law violations. This is an absurd double standard and places lawmakers in poor light.

JUSTINE LAUREN RICHARDS

The police and fire academies certainly are going to look dramatically different going forward. Who would want to enter a profession where they are physically, verbally and emotionally attacked every day with not only their lives but also finances at risk? This bill makes certain there is zero incentive for anyone to enter the police or fire academies, thereby ensuring that police and fire departments are crippled with closures looming. Early retirements will begin immediately and the NYPD is presently the perfect example of this.

For comparison, look no further than what has transpired with the Catholic Church here in Boston. The massive lawsuits depleted the Church's assets, forcing the Archdiocese to liquidate a number of properties. Having fewer churches in turn has not been a problem because the numbers at the Seminaries are lower than ever, so the Church could not staff parishes if they had them. Why would anyone enter the Seminary when becoming a member of the clergy will lop someone in with all of the other hateful priests who have come before them? That type of ugly, unilateral and discriminatory sentiment is exactly what this Senate bill perpetuates for law enforcement. This bill is about punitive measures aimed at an entire professional body which up until now was the gold standard of law enforcement in the United States.

Not many people understand entering the police, fire or teaching fields is not as much of a profession in as much as it is a calling. Everything is asked of these individuals. Most officers place their lives on the line every day because of a family member or associate who inspired them to think beyond themselves by placing the emphasis on serving others rather than being served. It is apparent that this bill attempts to encourage anyone feeling unfairly treated by a police officer, firefighter or teacher to bring suit and potentially drain that officer's, firefighter's or teacher's financial holdings. I am not aware of one teacher, firefighter or member of law enforcement who would seek for the same right to sue an individual who infringed upon their civil liberties. That right there is the difference between people of honor and those without honor; individuals who respond to a calling versus those who just want to call someone out.

Finally, the other meritless part of the Senate bill is the certification process by an independent review board. I wonder how the medical profession would react if lawmakers decided that all medical doctors should have their licenses issued by a board of accountants? Most residents of the Commonwealth understand that the governing bodies of law enforcement know the requirements, equipment, circumstances and situations better than anyone outside the field. Members of law enforcement do not believe they are beyond reproach. The accreditation and pertinent standards need to be determined and judged by their superiors or peers, just as they are for every single other trade or professional field requiring certification.

Tuesday morning I was walking through my town center in Weston where much construction work is underway. Several Weston Police Department officers were on details. I watched a vehicle drive up to a Sergeant and profusely thank him for issuing him a warning several years ago on a traffic stop. The gentleman said to the Sergeant: "you saved my life". Most of the other officers that day mentioned incredible numbers of people stopping to offer their support of law enforcement because of the passage of the Senate bill. However, the mood was not celebratory; rather it was like watching a rolling wake.

JUSTINE LAUREN RICHARDS

To provide some perspective, over the past four years I have placed over 35 calls to the Weston Fire Department for medical calls for my disabled sibling who lives with me and dozens of calls in the past two years to the Weston Police Department for issues with two separate stalkers I have. My condominium association has issued a No Trespassing Order against one stalker and I have a Harassment Prevention Order against the other stalker who resides 175 yards away from me. Every single officer from The Weston Police Department has responded in some manner, at some point, to one of my calls and during each call the officer conducts himself or herself with the highest level of professionalism and skill. Every member of the Weston Police Department treats me with the same courtesy and respect as they treat every other party. None of these incidents has risen to a level of assault, thankfully. The reason why Police responses are so imperative is to deter and keep at bay those with malicious intentions, potentially needing to employ the tactical skills they possess in de-escalation before violence commences.

It is a horrible feeling to feel unsafe at home. Because of the responses and support extended by the Weston Police Department I have begun to start feeling safer once again. Now I realize that the safety I have begun to enjoy will be fleeting as there is a likelihood law enforcement will soon disappear from the Commonwealth.

In my opinion, Massachusetts Police Officers have the best training of any force in the country. The proof of that belief lies across the Commonwealth in the robust economy and stellar real estate market, both of which will be placed in immediate jeopardy with the implementation of this bill.

I urge you Governor to veto the bill, but go beyond the veto and work with the State Senate and Legislature in a way that promises the Commonwealth will be safe for generations, while addressing the concerns brought about from incidents in Minneapolis and outside Massachusetts. Laws should not be created for Commonwealth residents based on incidents happening elsewhere. Rather, discussions should begin about what the issues are within the Commonwealth, which are similar to nationwide ones, but which require a specific response based upon the unique make-up here in Massachusetts.

Respectfully,

Justine Richards

Justine Richards