

Curran vetoes bill that would allow police to sue for 'discrimination'

By **The Island Now** - August 11, 2021



People who opposed a bill passed by the Nassau County Legislature that would protect first responders from discrimination rallied at the county's legislative building in Mineola last week. (Photo by Brahmjot Kaur)

BY BRAHMJOT KAUR

Nassau County Executive Laura Curran vetoed a bill that would make first responders a protected class under the county's Human Rights Law on Tuesday.

The bill, which was approved by the County Legislature 12-6 last week, would have allowed first responders such as police officers to sue people for civil damages in cases of harassment, menacing, assault or injury.

The Human Rights Law bars discrimination based on race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

Curran, in a veto letter, expressed concerns "that the law would intimidate free citizens from engaging in peaceful demonstrations without fear of retaliation." She also said there was "no consensus from elected officials" that the legislation was necessary at this time.

Curran, a Democrat, also referred to the opinion of the office of state Attorney General Letitia James, whom the county executive asked for advice on the bill. Curran said James' office questioned the bill's constitutionality.

It would take 13 votes in the County Legislature to override the veto.

"The Legislative Majority stands firmly behind Law enforcement, and will continue to do everything they can to deter violence against them," Chris Boyle, a spokesman for the Nassau County Legislature's Republican majority, said in a statement. "It's unfortunate that the County Executive has vetoed this bill that would help to deter the assault, menacing and harassment of police officers and other first responders. Majority legislators are currently discussing next steps."

"Incidents of first responders being menaced and harassed have gone up considerably in the last few years and the County Executive has sided against the legislature and against police officers and others who perform their jobs in harm's way," Nassau Police Benevolent Association President James McDermott told Newsday.

Under the legislation, if a first responder is in uniform or is "clearly identified" as a first responder, "there is an irrebuttable presumption" that the harassment, menacing, assault or injury is motivated by his or her status as a first responder.

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First responders would be able to sue protesters or other civilians for up to \$25,000 for such actions, or \$50,000 during a riot. Police officers and other first responders are already protected in the Nassau County Human Rights Law against housing, employment and public accommodations discrimination.

"The police are essential to protect citizens' freedom to speak, or refrain from speaking, from individuals who would use threats and violence to silence those with whom they disagree or to enforce conformity of thought," the bill states.

Advocates and passionate Long Island residents attended a rally on Friday outside the Nassau County Legislative Building in Mineola to demand the bill be vetoed prior to Curran's decision to do so on Tuesday. Protesters said the bill was unconstitutional and would stifle free speech.

Nia Adams, an organizer for the Long Island Progressive Coalition and co-organizer of the rally, said, "It is not only a redundant bill, but it is disgusting. It equates a career to the lived experiences of Black and brown folks — of race, of gender, of sex, of religion, and it's unacceptable."

The rally was co-organized by the Long Island Progressive Coalition and the Party for Socialism and Liberation with the support of other progressive organizations on Long Island.

Samantha Felix, the sister of deceased 19-year-old Matthew Felix, spoke at the rally. Matthew Felix, a carjacking suspect, was shot and killed by plainclothes and uniformed Nassau County police officers in Cambria Heights, Queens, on Feb. 25, 2020. His family has said he was unarmed.

"This bill might not specifically say that it is a response to Black Lives Matter, but the language on the bill is clear. This is a response for 'the civil unrest of last year.' Now it is very clear on what that implication is. It will only ensure the continuance of police brutality and the murders at the hands of the police," Felix said.

Protesters questioned the bill's necessity. Nassau County was named the safest county in the United States by U.S. News & World, and Adams pointed to this report at the rally.

"What harassment and hate did you see last year?" Adams said, "None [for police officers] to be worried about. However, this is the same county where Akbar Rogers was brutalized by the Freeport Village police, and they're still working."

Other organizations present at the rally were Long Island Activists, Get 2 Work LI, Pantsuit Nation Long Island, Together We Will Long Island, Latinos Unidos de Long Island, Nassau County DSA, Long Island Inclusive Communities Against Hate, Young Long Island for Justice, Anti-Racism Project, Long Island NORML, Gender Equality New York, Long Island Social Justice Action Network, Long Island Network for Change, Suffolk Progressives and Nassau NOW.

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