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Ideas on increasing diversity at State Police draw criticism



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

State Police Headquarters in Framingham.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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How do you improve diversity and equity at the Massachusetts State Police, where eight in 10 troopers are white men, no minorities hold high-ranking positions, and numerous discrimination complaints have been filed?

That was the weighty question a special commission studied throughout the fall before issuing several

recommendations at the end of December.

But the group's proposals have sparked criticism. Detractors, including a trooper who served on the commission, say the ideas won't bring nearly enough change.

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"This is yet another attempt to check a box," Lieutenant Lisa Butner, who served on the commission, wrote in a letter accompanying the group's final report. "Recommendations without mandates and changes to the existing laws will just allow the problem to continue."

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Lawmakers [established](#) the 17-member commission last summer following [questions](#) about how the agency hires, promotes, and treats personnel. A spring 2017 Globe report [detailed](#) claims by women and minority troopers — including [lawsuits](#) filed by Butner and more than a half-dozen others — who said the department's workplace culture can be discriminatory.

Representative Jerald Parisella,

who cochaired the commission

with Senator Paul Feeney, defended its work.

"There's no silver bullet," Parisella said. "This is an issue that's been going on for a fairly long time, but we think that with some of the reforms State Police have made and with these recommendations we can make some progress to improving diversity . . . This is a really good start."

Several other commission members backed the recommendations and how they developed them.

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The commission's Dec. 28 report featured eight recommendations, including that the department train recruit classes on a predictable basis — annually or biannually — rather than use the current sporadic approach, which has undercut diversity outreach.

The commission also said the department should eliminate its ban on visible tattoos and give extra credit on entrance exams for proficiency in a second language as well as for graduates of a program that teaches high schoolers about troopers' work.

State Police spokesman David Procopio said Colonel Kerry Gilpin, a commission member, "has made it a priority to increase diversity within the department."

"The State Police work every day to recruit qualified candidates of all backgrounds and to build bonds with diverse communities through community outreach, school visits, and job fairs," plus a mentorship program, Procopio said via e-mail.

"The department looks forward to carefully reviewing the details of the report and is pleased that recommendations were included to promote diversity through support for multilingual skills, akin to the much deserved support already provided to veterans," he added.

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But the recommendations did not get the commission's full backing.

Larry Ellison, president of the Massachusetts Association of Minority Law Enforcement Officers and a detective in the Boston Police Department, abstained from voting. He did not respond to requests for

comment. Neither did State Police Sergeant Mark Lynch, president of the troopers' union, who voted against the recommendations.

Butner also voted against them. In written comments, Butner said though she agreed with some recommendations, including more consistently timed recruit classes, "without changing the demographic make-up of those classes this is NOT a valid solution that will solve the diversity problem."

Butner wrote there's no evidence the department's tattoo policy has adversely affected women or minorities. Similarly, she said, it's unclear if giving preference to multilingual candidates will improve diversity and may have "unintended consequences."

She opposed giving credit to graduates of the department's program for high schoolers. "Historically this program and its graduates have reflected the current demographic makeup of the MSP," Butner wrote. Eighty-nine percent of the State Police force was white and 94 percent was male as of September, department statistics show. And of 55 people who held posts in the department's six top ranks 50 were white men and five were white women, including Gilpin.

Butner, who is black and served on the commission as the Massachusetts Association of Women in Law Enforcement's designee, said the numbers "are expected to get worse" as a significant number of minorities and women are eligible to retire.

In a statement, the association's board urged the department and lawmakers "to go further than the recommendations of this report and immediately establish a cadet program and take other concrete steps that will ensure more diversity in the short-term."

State Police Lieutenant Carmelo Ayuso, president of the Massachusetts Minority State Police Officers Association, also said the recommendations don't go far enough. He lamented that his group did not get a seat on the commission.

"Most of the people who were invited to the table do not have anything to do with what's going on or aren't affected directly," Ayuso said.

But commission member Christopher Santiago, the Massachusetts Latino Police Officers Association's president and Wheaton College's police chief, said the group was inclusive, listened to feedback, and developed worthwhile recommendations.

"This is a step forward in the right direction," Santiago said.

State Representative Russell E. Holmes, who followed the commission's progress, disagreed.

"This really doesn't go to the core of what the issues are with State Police in terms of diversity in hiring and promotions," Holmes said. "I don't want tweaks. I want true reforms."

Holmes noted that the commission's eight recommendations included all four suggestions submitted by Gilpin. He said the Black and Latino Legislative Caucus, to which he belongs, proposed numerous other ideas that were not adopted, including curbing preferences for hiring and promoting military veterans,

which Holmes said disproportionately favor white males. Parisella argued that department data don't show those preferences favor whites.

Holmes also criticized the commission for holding only three meetings and recommended not meeting again for two years. Santiago said the condensed time frame kept members focused and that reconvening in two years will allow data to be collected to assess the recommendations' impacts.

Some ideas from Butner and the Black and Latino Legislative Caucus, Santiago said, "could move the needle even further" but are beyond the commission's purview and are for lawmakers to handle.

"The work we put forward is stuff that's actually actionable," he said.

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