

Lawmakers press State Police leaders about plan to address culture of corruption

Why didn't anyone blow the whistle on payroll fraud that stretched back decades? What are leaders doing to change the department's cover-up culture?

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 26, 2020, 6:22 p.m.



The Massachusetts State House, in Boston. ELISE AMENDOLA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

State lawmakers have [remained mostly silent](#) over the last two years as scandal after scandal has beset the State Police force.

That changed Wednesday, with some legislators publicly pressing the department's colonel for the first time about widespread misconduct cases and corruption within the ranks.

Why didn't anyone blow the whistle on payroll fraud that stretched back decades? What are leaders doing to change the department's cover-up culture?

"We've made a number of steps, but there's still work being done," said Colonel Christopher Mason, who took over the force in November. "It's a culture shift."

Mason and other administration officials promised Wednesday that better days are ahead for the 2,100-member police force, and advocated for a slate of reforms proposed last month by Governor Charlie Baker. Lawmakers examined Baker's bill in the 90-minute hearing and pushed to learn more about the roots of the department's corruption.

The hearing followed [recent claims](#) by a trooper accused of fraud that top commanders hatched a scheme more than 20 years ago to push troopers to write citations under an illegal ticket quota system. As long as troopers handed in enough tickets to meet the quota, supervisors allegedly turned a blind eye and didn't require them to actually work their shifts.

Forty-six troopers have been accused — and nine convicted — of overtime pay fraud.

"What is as concerning about those who actually did the abuse was the lack of people in the State Police that came forward," said Senator Barry Finegold, an Andover Democrat and chair of the Joint Committee on Public Service.

Trooper Corey Mackey, president of the State Police Association of Massachusetts, or SPAM, told Finegold he didn't

know how the fraud was able to persist for so long. “It’s disheartening to say the least.”

The union’s vice president, Trooper Patrick McNamara, called it the work of “a few bad apples.”

“This is one small, specific incident,” he added.

But Finegold cut off McNamara’s testimony.

“Are you sure about that?” he asked. “You’re 100 percent confident, in front of this committee, that that’s not happening — that there’s not a culture of covering up?”

McNamara clarified, noting he hasn’t met all 2,100 members of the agency.

“The people that I know that are around me in my daily activities and my work are honorable individuals,” he said.

Baker’s bill seeks to allow the department to punish troopers more swiftly and severely and would allow the governor to name its future leader from outside the ranks.

Mason said Wednesday that the bill would give him the tools to turn the agency around. And he vowed he “will not be shy” about asking legislators for more changes if he feels they’re needed down the road.

Senator Joan Lovely and Representative Paul Tucker, both Salem Democrats, questioned why the bill doesn’t mandate that troopers lose their pensions after committing serious offenses.

“Why wouldn’t we want to put more teeth in this bill and say, ‘You’re also going to have your pension stripped?’ ” Lovely said. “I would think that would really deter any kind of activity.”

Public Safety Secretary Thomas Turco conceded that Lovely made a “good point,” but said he wasn’t familiar with the laws governing pensions. He noted decisions are handled by the state’s retirement board.

Turco acknowledged the department’s reputation has taken a hit and attributed the agency’s woes to longstanding, top-down, organizational failure.

“The department’s problems in this regard developed over many years and can be traced at least in part to outdated management practices, an insular culture, and too few measures and tools of accountability,” he said.

Officials from organizations representing minorities and women in law enforcement spoke in support of the bill, which also aims to improve diversity, including by making promotions less subjective and creating a cadet program.

SPAM officials said the union backs parts of the proposed package, but opposes the piece that would repeal a state law barring the governor from hiring an outsider as colonel. They said the job of colonel — a sworn, uniformed law enforcement position — should be filled only from within. They floated the idea of creating a separate civilian superintendent position, which could be hired from outside the agency and provide department oversight.

The union’s attorney also vowed a legal fight if legislators go along with a part of Baker’s proposal that would make it easier for the colonel to suspend without pay troopers who are accused of misconduct.

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