



Bruins 3, Penguins 4, Final

Mass. State Police is plagued with scandal. Lawmakers' response? Crickets

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, September 30, 2019, 8:13 a.m.



Governor Charlie Baker and Colonel Kerry Gilpin spoke at an April 2018 press conference to announce a series of reforms to policies and procedures at the Massachusetts State Police. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF FILE/GLOBE STAFF

The Massachusetts State Police force has [weathered](#) a widespread fraud probe, was found to have discriminated in its hiring, and has faced repeated allegations of systemic corruption and coverups over the past two years.

Yet even as new cases of misconduct emerge, including the [indictment](#) on Sept. 18 of a trooper who allegedly fired a rifle at an unarmed ATV rider on a Boston highway, the response on Beacon Hill has been roughly the same: crickets.

“I don’t get it,” said Kevin M. Burke, a former legislator, prosecutor, and state public safety chief whom the State Police [hired](#) to investigate one such [scandal](#). “I’m mystified and frankly have been for a few months now.”

While lawmakers have used their bully pulpits to publicly bash other officials and closely scrutinize other agencies mired in controversy, the state’s largest law enforcement agency has remained virtually unchallenged.

“The problem is there’s just too often a hesitancy to look at the State Police,” said Senator James Eldridge, a member of the Senate Committee on Post Audit and Oversight, who wants to hold oversight hearings. “It’s time for us to take a deeper look.”

Eldridge and several State House observers attributed the inaction to fears that criticism could lead to political blowback, especially from a historically strong — though now scandal-ridden — troopers union. That, combined with a general reluctance to take on law enforcement, appears to underpin the political establishment’s passive approach, they noted.

Several lawmakers, including House Speaker Robert DeLeo, have defended their response by pointing to a few [measures](#) that were tucked into the statewide budget in the summer of 2018 to try to bolster accountability in the department. They expressed hope that those efforts will pay off down the road. But those measures, such as the creation of an independent auditing unit, have been modest and slow to take root.

Governor Charlie Baker responded to recent requests for comment about State Police as he usually does: with a version of a statement that notes he is pleased with a slate of reforms [announced](#) early last year by Colonel Kerry Gilpin, as well as the agency's efforts since.

“The Department has made significant progress to increase transparency and accountability,” said the statement from Baker spokeswoman Sarah Finlaw. The statement noted it was Gilpin who referred to state and federal prosecutors the names of 46 troopers linked to potential payroll fraud — each had been identified in an internal probe that started before Gilpin's tenure.

The statement also highlighted the department's installation of GPS technology in cruisers, the start of a body camera pilot program, and internal payroll audits.

Yet, several of the pledged reforms are [unfinished and significantly overdue](#), and the rest of the changes have failed to slow the drumbeat of controversy at the agency.

The Globe reached out to more than a dozen lawmakers in recent weeks, including leaders of key committees focused on public safety issues and oversight. About half either declined to comment about State Police or did not respond to repeated requests, including Senate President Karen Spilka.

Those who did weigh in called the problems swirling around State Police deeply “troubling” and “disturbing.” But they said they had no plans to act.

Senator John Keenan, chair of the Senate Committee on Post Audit and Oversight, said he hasn't sought information from State Police because of the ongoing criminal probes.

“We trust that these investigations will be thorough, and ultimately successful in holding those involved accountable,” Keenan said in a statement.

However, ongoing investigations haven't stopped legislators from opening inquiries into other agencies.

[Despite](#) multiple [probes](#), including a [federal criminal investigation](#) into the natural gas explosions in the Merrimack Valley, lawmakers grilled utility officials at a public [hearing](#) late last year.

They [also](#) scrutinized UMass Amherst's controversial purchase of Mount Ida College at [public hearings](#) amid a [review](#) by the state attorney general's office.

Some lawmakers told the Globe that Baker, not the Legislature, needs to take charge.

“The administration needs to finally address the oversight of the State Police and this investigation or bring in an outside entity to perform a thorough and complete audit that we can all have faith in,” said Senator Michael Moore, co-chair of the Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security.

The nonintervention isn't new. Amid a spate of State Police controversies in 2018, Kathleen O'Connor Ives, then the head of the Senate Committee on Post Audit and Oversight, brushed aside oversight hearings, saying the committee was dealing with a “full plate” scrutinizing the MBTA and UMass Amherst's purchase of Mount Ida College.

“The State Police situation is so huge in terms of its seriousness and potential criminality, that it's actually beyond the scope of this committee,” O'Connor Ives said at the time, according to [MassLive.com](#).

In a recent phone interview, O'Connor Ives, who did not seek reelection and now works for a law firm, stuck by that decision.

She told the Globe that the State Police problems were getting plenty of attention — from the media, the governor's office, and state and federal prosecutors — and she felt that the committee's resources were limited and would have more of an impact elsewhere.

“You've got to be able to choose topics you believe you can make an impact on,” said O'Connor Ives.

The State Police, which stands as one of the state's largest public employers, has been engulfed in [constant controversy](#) for two years.

Top commanders resigned after [ordering](#) troopers to scrub embarrassing details from the arrest report of a judge's daughter. Recruitment and promotion practices have come under fire following complaints of [discrimination](#), [racism](#), and [retaliation](#).

Meanwhile, department officials have hidden, [destroyed](#), and [lost track](#) of records that could have exposed wrongdoing. A slew of troopers have been accused of breaking the law while both [off-](#) and [on-duty](#), and the head of State Police payroll [pleaded guilty](#) to embezzling thousands of dollars from the agency.

The biggest scandal has included 46 troopers implicated in a [widespread payroll fraud scheme](#), in which 10 have been criminally charged.

UMass Dartmouth political science professor Shannon Jenkins said that the lawmakers' inaction stems from State Police, and law enforcement in general, tending to have broad support among the public. And the State Police union remains “a powerful presence,” she added.

The union's clout has been [weakened](#) following the federal [indictment](#) of its former president, Dana Pullman, on a host of corruption, racketeering, and fraud [charges](#). Pullman's successor, Sergeant Mark Lynch, facing a recall vote from the union, resigned Sept. 16.

Lynch cited conflict with the union's executive board, a "perfect storm of scandal, allegations and mismanagement," in a letter sent to the 1,900-member union.

Burke, the former state representative, Essex DA, and public safety secretary under the former governor, Deval Patrick, said now is the "perfect time" for lawmakers to act.

"To take on an examination of an agency right now that really begs for an examination, I don't really think there's anything to be afraid of," Burke said.

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