



**CITY OF ROCHESTER
POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY BOARD**

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**Conor Dwyer Reynolds
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**Testimony of Conor Dwyer Reynolds
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Rochester, like many communities in New York, is in the midst of a police accountability crisis. I understand that New York's legislators are looking to fund programs that help address that crisis. The best dollar-for-dollar investment the state could make to hold police accountable is in tough, empowered civilian review boards. Let me explain.

Too often, responses to police accountability crises are piecemeal. We fund a new training program. We tweak a policy or procedure. We toughen policing-related criminal laws. But what we often fail to do is build *institutions* – things that link people, power, and procedures into a system for creating and sustaining long-term change.

Civilian review boards are one such institution of change. In theory, these boards can create an alternative justice system for police misconduct, one controlled by local communities and free from the inequities that prevent New Yorkers from obtaining justice through criminal or civil lawsuits against police officers. In practice, however, civilian review boards are largely failures, so inept that many civil rights advocates tell victims to avoid wasting their time by filing a complaint with their local board.

What explains the gap between the hope and history of civilian review is a single word: power. Civilian review boards, almost without exception, lack the resources they need to perform their duties. Lacking subpoena power, they fail to properly investigate cases. Lacking disciplinary power, they fail to create real consequences for officer misbehavior. And lacking independence, they fail to escape the political machinations that insulate officers from facing justice.

Recent years, however, have brought new hope to the project of civilian review. New boards across the country have been granted the legal powers to do their jobs. The largest remaining barrier to these empowered agencies' success is their inability to obtain a final, most important resource: money.

Empowered civilian review boards are, in essence, miniature district attorney's offices. They aim to thoroughly investigate and prosecute cases of misconduct. Doing so fairly and swiftly, as any district attorney knows, cannot be done on a shoestring budget or with a tiny handful of staff. Yet with their current budgets, even the most empowered civilian review boards are often doomed to fail. With only an infinitesimal fraction of the resources of the departments they are tasked with overseeing, civilian review boards prosecute cases at a snail's pace and conduct only the most surface-level reviews of police policies and procedures.

New York is home to some of the country's oldest civilian review boards. It is also home to some of the country's most powerful boards. In the current financial and political climate, it can be difficult for localities to devote the funding necessary to make sure these agencies succeed. This fact is why state-level funding is so desperately important to civilian review boards.

Civilian review boards in other states are receiving significant financial investments. New York cannot afford to fall behind. By making targeted investments in a select number of civilian review boards, New York can set the standard for what civilian review looks like not only nationally, but across the globe. There are many places to invest in to increase public protection for New Yorkers. Few places, however, promise such clear and tangible benefits as our state's civilian review boards.

I am happy to discuss this issue with any legislator or legislative staff who wishes to learn more about the potential of New York's civilian review boards and what concrete investments in these institutions may look like. My email is conor.reynolds@cityofrochester.gov.