

National Police Accountability Project

A Project of the National Lawyers Guild

OPPOSITION TO SB808 – An Act that Strips St. Louisans of the Right to Make Public Safety Decisions for Their Community

Written Testimony of National Lawyers Guild-National Police Accountability Project, Lauren Bonds, Executive Director

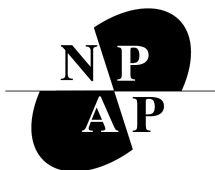
Transportation, Infrastructure, and Public Safety Committee – Wednesday, January 17, 2024

Chairman Fitzwater and Members of this Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue. The National Police Accountability Project (“NPAP”) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ending police violence by holding law enforcement and corrections officers accountable to constitutional and professional standards. NPAP opposes SB 808, a measure that would deprive St. Louisans of the ability to make decisions about public safety in their city as well as limit local elected officials’ discretion to formulate policies to address their communities’ needs.

At NPAP, we believe that local communities are the experts on what policing reforms will keep them safe. By placing the St. Louis Police Department under a state-controlled board of commissioners, SB 808 will dilute the ability of St. Louis residents to make important decisions about how their police department operates—including policies related to over-policing and accountability for officer misconduct. SB808 transfers decision-making authority away from local leaders who are directly accountable to voters to a group of appointed officials that are several degrees removed from any form of democratic accountability. Kansas City’s State-controlled police board forecasts the potentially unrepresentative and unresponsive nature of the potential board that would be installed in St. Louis.¹

¹ Alexander Lekhtman, *Kansas City Seeks to Resist State-Imposed Police Budget Increase*, FILTER Magazine, July 5, 2022, <https://filtermag.org/kansas-city-police-budget/>



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State legislation that mandates local government bodies maintain minimum funding and staffing levels for police departments is anti-democratic and will severely limit innovation in public safety. By preempting a city government from reducing funding to law enforcement, SB 808 would undermine a municipality's ability to make budgetary decisions in a time when local lawmakers need discretion to address unprecedented economic and public health problems created by the COVID-19 virus.

SB 808 will also stall the development of programs that could improve public safety by reducing crime and police violence. Because St. Louis spends in or around a quarter of their annual budget on their police department,² reducing expenditures on policing is a natural place for local lawmakers to remove funds. Particularly if cities plan to invest in programs like civilian-led traffic enforcement personnel or mobile crisis intervention teams that would reduce the need for the police.

Finally, it is important to note the troubling racial implications of the State of Missouri taking away the ability of a city with majority Black residents and Black leaders to make decisions for itself. Particularly when those decisions relate to policing, an issue that sadly plays an outsized role in the lives of Black Americans.

We urge you to vote against this bill. Thank you again for allowing us to provide testimony on this important bill. Please do not hesitate to contact us at legal.npap@nlg.org if you have any questions.

² *What Policing Costs: St. Louis, MO*, Vera Institute for Justice, <https://www.vera.org/publications/what-policing-costs-in-americas-biggest-cities/st-louis-mo>