

Below is a summary of a few of the most notable bills that the General Assembly considered during the 2021 Legislative Session:

Police Reform – The General Assembly passed several bills that will inevitably change policing in Maryland. The Senate’s Judicial Proceedings Committee spent several weeks of this session reviewing and debating proposals to alter Maryland law in several areas as it related to law enforcement. I am one of only two members of the General Assembly who is a retired police officer. During my career, I served as an Executive Officer to the Natural Resources Police Superintendent, was the FOP Lodge #8 President for two terms, and was the union shop steward for the State Law Enforcement Officers Labor Alliance (SLEOLA). I studied and earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degree at Johns Hopkins University in management. The cohort was under Hopkins’ Public Safety Leadership program and specifically designed for police and public safety management, administration, and leadership.

The Judicial Proceedings Committee held numerous sessions that lasted well into the night as we debated and offered numerous amendments to the package of bills presented. Time after time, I explained to my colleagues how policing ACTUALLY works in the State of Maryland. I continually fought for and explained the administrative disciplinary process, the search warrant process, and the administrative differences and challenges between high-ranking police officers (i.e., Lieutenant and above) and rank and file. It was difficult to dispense of the perception and bias of policing that have been present in our news media and social media for almost a year. I tried to draw on my own experiences and education to help everyone understand the efforts of our police in Maryland.

This committee process ultimately yielded a package of nine bills to overhaul policing in Maryland. As these bills were debated on the floor of the Senate, I continued to offer my expertise in the areas of policing to the Chamber. Six of these nine bills passed unanimously and, while I voted against three, all but one passed with bipartisan support. While this package of bills was not perfect, it represented a thoughtful approach with agreeable progress that made a significant effort to account for the concerns of all stakeholders. As a former law enforcement officer, I understand and support well intended police reform and updating policies that add accountability to policing.

However, once these bills were sent to the House of Delegates, the House consolidated all their police reform efforts into a single bill that made no attempt to balance the bills that had already passed in the Senate. The House “version” put forth more controversial policies and, in the process, reversed much of the Senate’s progress towards finding a consensus on these incredibly important issues. This legislation was rushed through without adequate input and feedback that has led to unrealistic expectations set for those who protect us, and these policies will instead put our citizens at risk and jeopardy. The majority of the Senate then chose to abandon these collaborative efforts and supported the House’s changes. Once these bills came back to the Senate, I stood with my Republican colleagues and offered numerous amendments to include the issues that I had fought so hard for while the bills were in my committee. Ultimately, the General Assembly passed four bills to change how police officers and departments operate throughout our State based off situations that occurred around the nation or specific issues that related to Baltimore City:

House Bill 670 repeals the current disciplinary system based on the Law Enforcement Officers’ Bill of Rights and replaces it with an overly complicated and unclear process that involves multiple newly-created boards and committees. Among other provisions, this bill also more than doubled the current liability caps for state and local governments for actions by law enforcement officers, which will particularly result in substantial costs for our small counties and municipalities. This bill significantly reduces the power and abilities of a Chief of Police or Sheriff.

Senate Bill 71 expands the use of body cameras by police officers and provides officers with greater access to mental health services. However, this bill also imposes a “use of force” standard that will add new criminal penalties for police misconduct that is already against the law. This law is based on unclear legal standards and could result in a police officer being subject to up to ten years in prison for violating its provisions which have been left to interpretation.

Senate Bill 178 makes all police misconduct records open to public inspection, including those based on charges that were unfounded or not sustained. In addition, this subjects police officers to a standard **that is not applied to any other profession or public official**. This bill also places significant restrictions on the use of warrants in investigations that far exceed those in similar legislation that had previously passed the Senate.

Senate Bill 600 establishes a new investigatory unit by giving the Office of the Attorney General authority to investigate and prosecute police-involved deaths of civilians. This new AG unit will be staffed by Maryland State Police officers and will minimize the authority the local State's Attorney's offices. It also places restrictions on the types of military surplus that police departments can purchase.

I voted against all four of these bills which will jeopardize the safety of the residents of Maryland and have a significant detrimental effect on recruitment and retention of police officers in our State. Governor Hogan vetoed House Bill 670, Senate Bill 71, and Senate Bill 178. Unfortunately, these vetoes were overridden before the end of the legislative session.

COVID Relief and Response – Another important issue that was addressed in the 2021 Legislative Session was providing assistance to individuals and businesses who had experienced financial hardships as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures that have been taken to slow the spread of the virus. Early in the legislative session, Governor Hogan introduced **Senate Bill 496**, the RELIEF Act. This legislation included direct economic impact payments to taxpayers receiving the state's Earned Income Tax Credit, a tax exemption for unemployment benefits, and sales tax relief for small businesses. The RELIEF Act also included provisions to prevent increases in unemployment insurance tax rates on businesses. I strongly support this important relief to Marylanders and voted for this legislation.

In addition to this financial relief, the General Assembly also passed legislation to address other areas that have been greatly impacted by the pandemic. **Senate Bill 3** will expand telehealth access in Maryland, which has been an important part of delivering health care during the last year. The effects of the pandemic, particularly the shift to virtual learning for students, also emphasized the need for all Marylanders to have reliable internet access. In addition to the substantial amounts of State and federal funding that are going to this important effort, **Senate Bill 66** will require the preparation of a statewide plan to ensure that all Marylanders have access to broadband by 2026. I voted for both bills.

Crime – The General Assembly passed two bills that will make it easier for violent criminals to be released from prison. **Senate Bill 202** removes the requirement for the Governor to approve parole for a person sentenced to life in prison. While this bill increases the number of years a person serving a life sentence must serve before being eligible for parole from 15 to 20 years, this increase does not apply to those who are serving a sentence for a crime committed before October 1, 2021. That means that prisoners currently serving a life sentence can be paroled after serving 15 years by the decision of the Parole Commission alone. I opposed removing this critical oversight over the parole process and voted against this legislation. I also voted against **Senate Bill 494**, which will reduce sentences for juvenile offenders who were tried as adults.

I co-sponsored and voted for **Senate Bill 852**, which would have increased penalties for knowingly selling a gun to someone who commits a crime and created tougher penalties for the use of assault weapons in a crime and illegally possessing and selling firearms. For the second year in a row, this important anti-crime legislation passed the Senate but did not receive a vote in the House of Delegates.

Immigration – The General Assembly passed **Senate Bill 218** which gives millions of dollars to individuals who do not use a Social Security Number to file their taxes, including illegal immigrants. This was done by altering the earned income credit, which was previously available only to citizens by requiring the use of a Social Security Number. This is a "refundable" tax credit and the amount of this credit can exceed the recipient's income tax liability, meaning that this bill will give taxpayer money to those who are in this country illegally. I strongly oppose giving Maryland taxpayer money to illegal immigrants and voted against this legislation.

Also this session, the General Assembly passed **House Bill 16**, which is aimed at limiting cooperation on immigration enforcement between State and local public safety officials and the Federal government. I voted against this legislation.