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New Board Approves Citizen's Oversight Commission for Sheriff's Department

After two years of debate, discussion and impassioned testimony from residents, reform advocates and former jail inmates, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to establish a citizen's oversight commission for the Sheriff's Department. Broadly framed, the purpose of the commission will be to ensure heightened public scrutiny of the department. The commission, first proposed by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and then Supervisor Gloria Molina, became a reality under the newly constituted board. Supervisor Hilda Solis co-authored the motion with Supervisor Ridley-Thomas.

Allegations of excessive force, significant litigation costs and a moral imperative to ensure constitutional policing in the jails and communities illustrate the need for an oversight entity, the majority of Supervisors agreed.

Although he was not present at the board meeting, newly sworn in Sheriff Jim McDonnell has stated his strong support for such a commission, promising to work closely with the commission and forge a positive working relationship with the panel.

With the nation highly shaken by the publicized shooting deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, the creation of an oversight panel – long a best practice in municipalities

across the country – gained new urgency. “Ferguson” Supervisor Ridley-Thomas said, has become a byword for a host of issues that Los Angeles County must proactively seek to avoid.

“The sheriff’s department has long required a level of scrutiny that has been missing. The time has come,” said Supervisor Ridley-Thomas. “New department leadership has been elected with a mandate for reform that embraces accountability and transparency and recognizes that an independent advisory oversight commission is an important tool in restoring public confidence.”

“For more than two years, the county’s citizens have called for creation of a citizen’s oversight commission,” said Supervisor Solis. “Across this county, the public trust in the people charged with keeping us safe has fallen to a new low. Under the new leadership we have a chance to restore the trust given the county”.

Supervisor Solis added that the creation of an oversight commission is a fiscally prudent step, one that ultimately will result in better policing, fewer lawsuits and therefore more resources to be used on pressing policy matters.

The vote for the Citizen’s Commission, calls for the creation of a working group that includes the Sheriff, the Inspector General and one appointee of each Supervisor, that will come up with recommendations on the oversight commission’s mission, authority, size, structure, relationship to the Office of the Sheriff and to the Office of the Inspector General.

“An advisory citizen’s commission would ensure that all segments of our community feel a greater investment in our Sheriff’s Department and that they are able to work with us in ensure that the LASD’s policing is effective, fair and constitutional,” noted Sheriff McDonnell in a letter of support.

Each supervisor will appoint a commissioner to the panel. In addition, it calls for a funding and staffing plan for the commission and for a formal agreement between the Sheriff’s Department, the Office of the Inspector General and the board.

Supervisor Kuehl also noted that a commission would increase public trust, and protect both sworn officers and inmates, adding: “It’s certainly been

shown to be effective in other counties. It's also a smart policy. We need a single centralized body to cut through this confusion and monitor the department.”

More than 50 speakers testified before the Board on the issue, the overwhelming majority in support of the commission. Speakers included Rabbi Jonathan Klein of Clergy & Laity for Economic Unity, Marsha Temple, executive director of the Integrative Recovery Network and Kim McGill, executive director of the Youth Justice Coalition and Patrice Cullors, executive director of the Coalition to End sheriff Violence.

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