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Strengthening Civilian Oversight of the Sheriff's Department Through Subpoena Power

As part of continued efforts to increase public transparency and accountability over the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a [motion](#) by Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Sheila Kuehl to provide recommendations for how to modify County ordinances to grant the Sheriff's Civilian Oversight Commission (COC) the power to compel, through the Office of Inspector General issuing subpoenas.

The motion directs County Counsel, in consultation with the Inspector General and the Executive Director of the COC, to report back in writing to the Board of Supervisors in 30 days with ways to grant the COC access to Department data, documents, and direct testimony by issuing subpoenas when deemed necessary by a majority of COC commissioners to fulfill its oversight function. County Counsel will also look at the impact this action would have on the March 2020 ballot measure titled "Los Angeles County Sheriff Civilian Oversight Commission Ordinance."

"Transparency and accountability have been – and remain – critical hallmarks to the reform of the Sheriff's Department. The COC's recent lack of access to Sheriff's Department data, documents and testimony has impeded their ability to perform their core oversight functions," said Supervisor Ridley-Thomas. "Backtracking on progress made is not an option. Given this, the Board must re-think – and must be open to re-configuring – their authority, including granting subpoena power, in the name of stronger reform."

“External oversight is the only means to which sustainable reform, where checks and balances are robust enough to guard against abuse of power at the top, can truly happen,” said Max Huntsman, Los Angeles County Inspector General. “What we need is a Sheriff’s Civilian Oversight Commission with the power to require compliance with the law and an Inspector General with the investigative power to uncover what may be hidden by the Sheriff’s Department.

“There are moments when we must question the actions of the Sheriff’s Department. It is in those moments that we must have every tool at our disposal to be an effective oversight body and shine a light where one must be shone,” said Patti Giggans, COC Chair and Executive Director of Peace Over Violence. “Subpoena power through the Inspector General would represent a tool of last resort, but one that we hope will give us maximum cooperation with the Sheriff’s Department.”

“As a former prosecutor, working on behalf of the people, you had tools at your disposal to do your job—to get to the truth and ensure that justice was done,” said Brian Williams, Executive Director of the COC. “Similarly, in my position on the Commission, working on behalf of the people, to effectively do our job, we must have tools available to us—to shed a light, to increase trust, and better the transparency of the LASD. Subpoena power helps us with this.”

Recognizing the importance of civilian oversight and the need for access to information, this motion comes after the October 1, 2019 Ridley-Thomas – Solis [motion](#) which, unanimously created the Probation Oversight Commission (POC) with a range of authorities, including the power to compel through the Inspector General. Today’s motion will ensure both civilian oversight bodies – the POC and the COC – have access to information from the respective departments they oversee.

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