



Washington Association of
**SHERIFFS &
POLICE CHIEFS**

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Steven D. Strachan

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NEW POLICE REFORMS WILL CHANGE POLICE RESPONSE

The role of law enforcement is changing; however, public safety for all in our local communities has been and continues to be our number one priority. Recent legislatively mandated police reforms in Washington State reflect changing societal expectations and focus on reducing police interactions and decreasing potential uses of force by law enforcement. In practice, the reforms will require law enforcement to evaluate responses to non-criminal calls and the role of law enforcement filling every gap in public services. Calls for service that involve law enforcement will be even more measured and deliberate to reduce the potential of interactions requiring use of force, and to follow the new laws, which go into effect July 25.

Washington's law enforcement agencies are not de-policing. Adapting, reforming and reimagining the public service of law enforcement is common to responsible and responsive organizations. It is also challenging. As a result of the changes required by law from the 2021 legislative session, law enforcement's response to certain calls, and tactics while at the scene, will be significantly different from past practices. As these changes are implemented, it is essential for communities to engage with their respective law enforcement agencies constructively to understand and adapt to both intended and perhaps unintended changes to service capacity, delivery, and outcomes.

On the whole, WASPC anticipates that the policing reforms may have the positive impact of reducing the number of violent interactions between law enforcement and the public. However, we owe it to the public we serve to be candid and share that we are deeply concerned that some policing reforms may have unintended outcomes that result in increased levels of confusion, frustration, victimization, and increased crime within our communities.

Much of Washington's law enforcement reforms rely heavily on the transfer of current and historical services to non-law enforcement parties and service providers, such as behavioral health providers and homeless services. Washington's law enforcement agencies welcome the helpful participation and expertise of other appropriately prepared service providers.

The reliance on other systems (fire/EMS, behavioral health, chemical dependency, social services, etc.), some of which are not yet fully developed or are underfunded, along with changes to the use of force law will restrict proactive enforcement, the ability to detain, and the scope of police response. Each independent agency makes its own policy decisions; however, some legislative reform measures changed what have historically been local decisions. Some of these changes include:

- Use of force law changes may significantly reduce the types of calls to which law enforcement will respond, especially if they do not involve a crime or may be better directed to other resources.
- Many less-lethal weapons commonly used as an alternative to the use of deadly force are considered “military equipment” under the new law and their use may be prohibited.
- Pursuit policies are now strictly limited, and pursuits are categorically prohibited for most criminal offenses. There is a concern that this could increase reckless driving, traffic fatalities, and the apprehension of fewer suspects.
- Nearly all juvenile contacts must be made through legal counsel. This will impact all investigations involving juveniles.
- Release and furloughs of incarcerated persons will continue.
- The number of available officers and deputies may continue to decline with increasing retirements and recruiting challenges.
- There have been significant changes in enforcement and prosecution of drug crimes due to the state Supreme Court decision (*Blake vs Washington State*) and legislation enacted following the Court’s decision.

WASPC has advocated for the goals of many of the reforms, while raising concerns about the specific language and outcomes of certain elements of the new laws. See WASPC’s proposed law enforcement reforms webpage at www.waspc.org/reforms, and a one page document summarizing those reforms [here](#). See examples of WASPC’s support of the goals of reform legislation while raising concerns about their specifics [here](#).

WASPC is working with legislators and supports follow-up legislation to address unintended consequences, ambiguities, and conflicting provisions of the new laws. WASPC and its members will continue to work in good faith to improve the public service of law enforcement and embrace the sanctity of human life.

Without question, we support the sanctity of human life as the enduring priority for policing and seek to continue to monitor and communicate how the new reforms affect public safety across Washington. Our communities deserve the highest level of public safety. We commit to work together in good faith to sustain high quality public safety services and to continuously earn the public’s trust and respect. Every agency has the duty to provide the best service under changing circumstances, and we are committed to work toward this goal together.

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WASPC was founded in 1963 and consists of executive and top management personnel from law enforcement agencies statewide. It includes the 39 elected county sheriffs, and 240 police chiefs, as well as the Washington State Patrol, the Washington Department of Corrections, and representatives of several federal agencies. WASPC is the only association of its kind in the nation combining representatives from local, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement into a single body, working toward a common goal. WASPC’s function is to provide specific materials and services to all law enforcement agencies in the state, members, and non-members alike.