

Senate Republicans vote to punish communities that cut law enforcement spending

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The state Senate voted today to punish communities that reduce their spending on law enforcement, restrict the use of chokeholds by police officers and require officers to report colleagues who use excessive force.

SB 121, which would restrict the use of chokeholds except in life-threatening situations or in self-defense, passed via voice vote. The new requirements in excessive force cases in SB 120 passed 30-2 with Republicans Julian Bradley, of Franklin, and Steve Nass, of Whitewater, opposed.

SB 119 would reduce shared revenue for communities that reduce spending on the hiring, training and retention of law enforcement, fire departments or emergency medical responders. Dems decried the bill, saying it was an overreaction to what they described as limited calls to defund the police in the wake of George Floyd's death last year at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer.

They added it was a double whammy for communities that have seen shared revenue from the state remain flat for years while they have struggled to maintain services with restrictions on how much they can raise from residents through property taxes.

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Senate Minority Leader Janet Bewley, D-Mason, said the bill would end up punishing the departments that need state aid the most to cover their costs. She said it was sending a message of punishing communities that do the "bad thing" and reward those that do the "good thing." She predicted Gov. Tony Evers would veto the bill if

it reaches his desk.

The bill cleared the chamber along party lines 20-12.

“They’re not doing the bad thing. They’re doing the only thing they can with the limited budgets they have,” Bewley said.

The restriction also would include a reduction in shared revenue for communities that didn’t cut spending, but reduced the number of officers, firefighters or EMTs. Any money cut would be redistributed to the communities that didn’t cut law enforcement spending.

The bill was amended to exempt communities that employ less than 30 officers. It also wouldn’t penalize communities that reduce spending on law enforcement without cutting the number of officers. That wouldn’t penalize communities where officers retire and younger, lower-paid officers take their place.

Sen. Van Wanggaard, R-Racine and the bill’s co-sponsor, took aim at Milwaukee, saying it has cut 400 police officers and closed seven firehouses. He argued public safety should be the first priority for municipalities.

“It’s the job of government to make sure the people who live in their communities have a safe neighborhood to live in,” Wanggaard said. “I would argue some municipalities, they don’t have that safe neighborhood because they have unilaterally eliminated law enforcement from being on the street.”

SB 120, the use of force bill, outlines when it is permissible for law enforcement officers to use force and requires them to intervene when a colleague sees another cross the line. It also would set a standard that law enforcement officers must make every effort to preserve and protect human life and the safety of all persons. The use of force definitions were added to the original version of the bill to reflect proposals advanced in the Assembly through the Speaker’s Task Force on Racial Disparities.