

PATERSON PRESS

# NJ law to fix crisis response was signed six months ago. It's still not implemented

4-minute read

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PATERSON — Social justice activists last January celebrated Gov. Phil Murphy's signing of a new law that was supposed to help prevent incidents such as the fatal police shooting of Paterson's Najee Seabrooks in March 2023.

The law called for the creation of a new state advisory council that is supposed to establish best practices for handling emergency responses to people in a mental health or substance abuse crisis.

The law — named after Seabrooks and Andrew Washington, who was fatally shot by a police officer in Jersey City in August 2023 — said the advisory council would hold six meetings per year. Those sessions would be open to the public with agendas, minutes and other documents posted on a state government website.

## *Story continues below photo gallery*

But six months later, the advisory council that was supposed to start work 45 days after Murphy's bill signing on Jan. 12 has not yet held any meetings.

Meanwhile, on Friday, state officials revealed they had taken one major step in implementing a separate provision of the Seabrooks-Washington law by awarding grants to nonprofit groups in Paterson, Camden, Newark and Trenton to set up pilot programs for community crisis response teams.

The Paterson award was to Reimagining Justice Inc./Paterson Healing Collective's Paterson Compassionate Care Collaborative Project, which also includes the local Black Lives Matter group as well as St. Joseph's University Hospital.

The state also had set aside money for pilot programs in Jersey City and Middlesex County. But officials on Friday said they had not received any "eligible applications" for those locations and will solicit a new batch of applications.

## **Seabrooks-Washington law provided \$12M for pilot programs**

The Seabrooks-Washington law provided \$12 million for pilot programs, or \$2 million per county. Friday afternoon's announcement by Attorney General Matthew Platkin and Murphy did not explicitly say whether each county's pilot program would get the full county allotment of \$2 million.

Paterson Press asked the governor's office last week what were Murphy's picks for his seven "public member" appointments to the advisory council.

"As you know, our office does not comment on pending appointments," said a Murphy spokesperson.

Neither the governor's office nor the AG's office indicated when the advisory council would begin its work.

"I'm saddened to hear that it hasn't been implemented yet," said longtime Newark activist Lawrence Hamm. "If they don't do anything, there's going to be another case like Najee Seabrooks, another case like Andrew Washington."

“I’m disappointed, but it doesn’t surprise me,” Hamm added. “Police brutality cases have faded from the media after the George Floyd case.”

Yannick Wood of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice said he was encouraged by the fact that the AG’s Office started the process for launching the pilot programs by taking applications for the funding in May.

“There’s no time to lose here,” Wood said. “The longer this takes to roll out the longer we continue to have the same status quo, and that’s a status quo in which a person in crisis gets a police response instead of mental health response.”

## **Will ask Gov, Murphy for update on advisory council**

Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter, whose legislative district includes Paterson, said she believes the Murphy administration is fully committed to putting the Seabrooks-Washington law into effect. Sumter said sometimes it takes time to fill seats on newly created government committees. She noted that many officials in Trenton were fully focused on crafting a state budget by July 1.

“We have to keep it alive so we can get some movement,” the assemblywoman said of the Seabrooks-Washington law.

Sumter told Paterson Press she would ask the governor’s office for an update on the advisory council in the next several weeks.

The AG’s Office has not made public any of the pilot program applications that received funding.

“We’re just waiting like everybody else to hear what the next steps are,” said Liza Chowdhury, one of the Healing Collective’s founders.

## **Wants mental health experts to handle crises, not police**

Paterson BLM leader Zellie Thomas said his group wants to see mental health professionals handling emergency crisis responses, not law enforcement officers. “We want to create a model that other towns can follow,” said the Paterson activist.

It remains to be seen what policies the pilot programs will have concerning people in crisis who have weapons. Seabrooks, for example, was wielding a knife and lunged at police when he was shot. He also had told police negotiators that he had a gun.

In the aftermath of the Seabrooks shooting, St. Joseph’s University Medical Center’s crisis team declined to respond to several emotional crisis incidents in Paterson involving people with weapons.

The state advisory council that hasn’t held any meetings yet is supposed to craft “best practices and recommendations concerning the development of a community crisis response program.”

## **AG still investigating how police handled Seabrooks shooting**

The original version of the Seabrooks-Washington law said the advisory council would be part of the New Jersey Department of Health. The original bill also said the health department would make the decisions on which groups get pilot program grants.

But that changed. The final version of the law shifted the oversight responsibility from the health department to the AG’s Department of Law and Public Safety.

The AG’s Office also is conducting the investigations into the police handling of the shootings that resulted in the deaths of Seabrooks and Washington. Hamm, the Newark activist, said he thought it was important that the public not lose sight of those probes.