



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civilian oversight of police has been debated in Worcester for more than half a century. Beginning with the creation of the Human Rights Commission in 1970, successive decades have seen renewed calls for independent review in response to high-profile incidents and broader concerns about accountability. Despite these repeated discussions, Worcester has not established a civilian oversight body.

Today, Worcester stands as the 114th largest city in the United States and the second largest in New England, yet it remains one of the few major cities in the nation without a civilian review board or comparable oversight structure. More than half of the 200 largest U.S. cities have adopted such mechanisms, and within the region, Boston, Providence, Cambridge, Hartford, and New Haven all operate oversight entities. Worcester's absence is striking in this context—and even more so in light of the December 2024 U.S. Department of Justice findings report, which identified systemic weaknesses in the city's internal accountability systems.

KEY FINDINGS

- **A history of revisited but unrealized proposals.** Calls for oversight arose in the 1970s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, typically following incidents or investigations that drew public concern. Each effort generated discussion but ultimately did not result in permanent structures.
- **Oversight is widespread nationally.** Research shows that a majority of large U.S. cities operate with an oversight entity, ranging from review boards to investigatory or hybrid models. Worcester is noticeably absent among its peers.
- **Current systems may fall short of best oversight practices.** Worcester has systems for oversight—such as the Bureau of Professional Standards, the Human Rights Commission, the Investigations Division of the Executive Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and the state POST Commission—but individually each lack some of the principles that define effective civilian oversight.
- **Principles of effective oversight are well-established.** National research emphasizes independence, investigatory authority, sustained resources, and open reporting as the foundation of trust and legitimacy.

The Worcester Regional Research Bureau recommends that the City of Worcester establish a civilian oversight entity to strengthen accountability and rebuild public trust. Civilian oversight does not by itself guarantee

changes in problematic practices; however, it ensures that violations of law or residents' rights are brought into the open, creating an essential layer of accountability, transparency, and democratic governance.

MINIMUM FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE OVERSIGHT

To be credible and effective, any civilian oversight entity in Worcester must be built with certain baseline features: operationalizing national principles of independence, transparency, and accountability while adapting them to local needs. At a minimum, these include:

1. **Clear Jurisdictional Authority and Discretion:** Explicit power to investigate or review cases, prioritize serious complaints and mediate where appropriate.
2. **Scope and Execution of Investigations:** Clearly defined relationship with internal police processes, avoiding duplication while ensuring independent oversight of serious cases.
3. **Independent Investigative Capacity:** Professional investigators and staff with authority to go beyond second-guessing police inquiries.
4. **Sufficient and Sustained Budget:** Predictable funding, insulated from political shifts, so resources cannot be cut when findings prove inconvenient.
5. **Selection and Appointment of Members:** Multi-step or multi-authority appointment process to reduce political capture and reinforce independence.
6. **Limits on Police Representation:** Civilian-dominated membership, with restrictions on current or former law enforcement to preserve independence.
7. **Representative and Inclusive Membership:** Reflects Worcester's diverse residents and districts.
8. **Member Training Requirements:** Structured training in police policy, civil rights, and investigative standards for informed, consistent decisions.
9. **Access to Police Data Systems:** Routine access to complaints, use-of-force reports, and internal records to support investigations and spot systemic patterns.
10. **Subpoena Power:** Ability to compel testimony and obtain records, ensuring oversight is substantive, not symbolic.
11. **Transparency in Investigation Results:** Public release of findings and dispositions whenever possible, balanced with confidentiality.
12. **Regular and Public Reporting:** Annual or quarterly reports on cases, trends, and recommendations for city leadership and the public.
13. **Community Listening and Engagement:** Active public education, input, and accessibility across neighborhoods.
14. **Handling of Disciplinary Recommendations:** Police leadership must respond formally, explaining whether recommendations are adopted and why.