



****PRESS RELEASE****

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Contact: Catie Stewart, catie.stewart@sen.ca.gov, 610-675-6342

Senator Wiener Introduces SB 271 to Allow for More Diverse and Democratic Sheriff Elections

The Sheriff Democracy and Diversity Act will restore California's long-standing eligibility requirements for Sheriff candidates, allowing all registered voters to run for Sheriff in their community

SACRAMENTO – Senator Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco) has introduced SB 271, the Sheriff Democracy and Diversity Act, to allow all registered voters to run for Sheriff — reverting back to the eligibility requirements in place from 1850 until 1989. Currently, only law enforcement officers — people with POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) certificates — are eligible to run for Sheriff. Because only a tiny pool of people are eligible to run, Sheriffs are effectively insulated from political accountability and are only accountable to the law enforcement officers who are authorized to challenge their reelection. As a result, various Sheriffs have aggressively cooperated with ICE to facilitate deportations, have ignored and refused to endorse COVID public health orders, and have failed to be responsive to community demands for police and jail reform. Moreover, most Sheriffs — among the most powerful elected positions in the state — run for reelection unopposed, and 49 out of the 58 California Sheriffs are white men.

From 1850 until 1989, California law allowed any registered voter to run for Sheriff in their county. In 1989, after intense pressure from the Sheriffs Association, the law was changed in reaction to a non-law enforcement officer being elected Sheriff in San Francisco.

With the racial justice uprising this summer in response to police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and with the long overdue focus on mass incarceration and unsafe prison conditions, there is increasing consensus in favor of a dramatic reimagining of policing and our criminal justice system. Current state law regarding Sheriff eligibility requirements, however, make it challenging to move towards police and criminal justice reform, given the narrow pool of candidates eligible to run. Various Sheriffs in California do not act in the best interest of constituents on a number of issues: some cooperate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), despite California's sanctuary state status; some have refused to enforce health orders while California's COVID-19 death and hospitalization numbers rose; and some Sheriffs' departments treated protestors with unnecessary force this summer during the uprising.

California operated for 139 years without the additional requirement that Sheriff candidates have a POST certificate. If we want to see dramatic and important racial justice and immigrant justice measures implemented, and our criminal justice system changed, we must diversify and democratize who can run for Sheriff. Voters should be able to elect a candidate who represents their values, and who has the

training and skills necessary to change our criminal justice system and prioritize mental health training and de-escalation rather than force.

SB 271 will restore long-standing eligibility requirements that will make California Sheriff elections more democratic and diverse. The legislation is sponsored by the California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC), NextGen California, Secure Justice and Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club.

"It's time we prioritize democracy and diversity in our Sheriff elections," said **Senator Scott Wiener**. "Anyone who wants to run for Sheriff and is qualified should run, and voters can democratically elect whomever they believe is the best candidate. We need Sheriffs who actually represent the beliefs and values of their constituents. California must reimagine its criminal justice system, and to do that, we will need a more diverse pool of Sheriff candidates who are committed to this project."

"For far too long county Sheriff's departments have failed to faithfully implement meaningful reforms that center the very communities they are meant to protect and serve," said **Ken Spence, Senior Policy Advisor at NextGen California**. Expanding the pool of candidates to include community leaders and qualified experts will broaden the range of perspectives and skills Sheriffs bring to the office, such as invaluable backgrounds in mental health care and trauma-informed approaches. This reform has the potential to fundamentally change the way the public experiences policing in our state. Therefore, NextGen California is proud to support The Sheriff Democracy and Diversity Act and thanks Senator Wiener for championing this key legislation."

"The California Immigrant Policy Center is proud to partner with Senator Wiener to co-sponsor The Sheriff Democracy and Diversity Act, an initiative to remove the exclusionary law enforcement requirement for county sheriffs," said **Orville Thomas, CIPC's Director of Government Affairs**. "We continue to see how sheriffs impact California, ignoring concerned efforts at oversight and transparency because they traditionally don't see viable challengers at the ballot box. The result is local law enforcement offices sidestep California law while continuing to remain entrenched in the racist criminal legal system and the federal deportation machine. This effort to return California back to open sheriff elections opens the office to a diversity of candidates and a different vision for the criminal-legal system."

"In Alameda County, our Sheriff cooperates with ICE and oversees a jail notorious for in-custody deaths and inhumane conditions," said **Judith Stacey, chair of the Sheriff Reform Project** at the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club. "Yet under the law enforcement criteria enacted in 1988, we could find no eligible candidates sensitive to the needs of our Black, Brown, poor and immigrant neighbors. After the racial justice uprisings last summer, local activists realized that the time is right for real public safety reform. We need the Sheriff Democracy and Diversity Act to expand the pool and reimagine the mission of county Sheriffs in California.

"At present, most Sheriffs in California are white males, which does not reflect the diverse population of our state," said **Brian Hofer, Executive Director of Secure Justice**. "Today, Sheriffs are essentially

managers of a large bureaucracy, overseeing civilian, unarmed employees that carry out most of the duties of the office of Sheriff. Candidates for the office should not be restricted solely to those with law enforcement experience, as other skill sets are needed as we move some functions away from armed officers. Senator Wiener's Sheriff Democracy and Diversity Act will allow for a broader pool of candidates to seek one of the most important offices in our state, the role of county Sheriff."