

Choose police boss and role carefully

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Chicago Tribune (1963-Current file); Dec 23, 1991; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune
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CHICAGO—The search for a new Chicago police superintendent is on. The Police Board's chairman, while committing to a national search, has counseled in a memo to the mayor that someone should be chosen quickly from within the department. This should be done, according to the chairman, by Jan. 29, the day that Supt. LeRoy Martin's career as a police officer concludes with mandatory retirement.

The questions of time and whether the next head of the department comes from within or without are secondary to the question of where the department is going and how we get the person best qualified to lead us there. For some time, the Chicago Alliance for Neighborhood Safety and the community organizations in the Neighborhood Policing Task Force have been thinking about this.

The direction, we have concluded, should be toward neighborhood policing. Chicago should get there by first trying it in pilot projects and then taking what works and applying it citywide.

Neighborhood policing is a philosophy and strategy that focuses on working in a problem-solving partnership with community organizations on responsiveness to community concerns, on prevention instead of reactive crime-fighting. Clearly, choosing a superintendent committed to this new arrangement between the community and the police is crucial to the goal.

How this superintendent is chosen is also important. Public participation is crucial. There needs to be a forum in which the public has an opportunity to express its concerns and ask its questions. There needs to be an opportunity for Chicagoans to query candidates in writing. An exchange between community and candidates will provide the mayor with the benefit of community

input and give him deeper insight into the candidates he must choose among.

If a national search is to be conducted and a public and participatory process is to take place, how can this be accomplished with credibility by Jan. 29? Why the hurry? Supt. Martin's retirement date has been known since he was appointed in 1987. Is there suddenly a crisis that justifies discarding a calm, systematic and public search to fill such an important position?

Beyond experience and honesty, administrative and leadership skills, what kind of person are the board and mayor looking for? Unless they know what kind of police department they want for Chicago, how will they recognize the person best suited to lead it?

The mayor should move quickly to make the procedure, timetable and key criteria in the selection of a new superintendent clear. On Jan. 29, while the search is going forward, the mayor should appoint Supt. Martin to an interim position or allow the first deputy superintendent to become the acting superintendent or choose some other explicitly transitional figure. The appointment of such a caretaker will allow time for a serious search.

Next summer, a year from now, five years from now, when we look back, it is important that we not have a department doing business as usual and a still rising volume of violent crime. When we look back, it should be to celebrate an important and productive landmark in the city's public safety efforts, not to lament the haste with which the wrong person was chosen to lead Chicago into a new era of policing.

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