

Abstract

Police Chief Turnover – Meddling by Elected Officials

William J. Woska, J.D.

The high rate of turnover in police chiefs is causing considerable concern throughout the United States. Individuals who have prepared themselves through education, training, and years of experience are leaving the top cop's position in increasing numbers. In addition, the public sector is permanently losing many of these highly trained persons to education, private security, and consulting positions.

Although the loss of the top law enforcement administrator in public agencies may not be unusual considering the need for the individual to be a leader, administrator, counselor, and interpreter of political policy on a continuing basis, elected officials are more and more in the forefront as to the reason for turnover.

City Councils, Boards of Supervisors, and other persons elected to public office have a significant role in establishing policy for the organization to provide services to the citizens within the jurisdiction. However, elected officials are increasingly moving into administrative matters which are the responsibility of city managers and administrators who are hired to manage the organization on a daily basis. When public safety is involved and these elected officials politicize decisions, give little or no consideration to recommendations coming from the department, and give the impression that they know more about policing than the police chief, it is not unusual that individuals look elsewhere for employment. The inability of an organization to retain top administrators poses a real challenge to morale and motivation and instilling long-term continuity.

Police Chief Turnover – Meddling by Elected Officials

Introduction

The high rate of turnover in Police Chiefs is causing considerable concern throughout the United States. Major cities losing their police chief since 2009 have included Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami, Dallas, San Jose, and Oakland, among others. In addition, smaller cities such as Orland, California, Jonesboro, Georgia, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Clearwater, Florida, New Hartford, New York, and many others, are seeing the top law enforcement officer exit through a virtual “revolving door”.

Why the high turnover for police chief? In some instances it may be a retirement after many years of service. In other cases, it may be a promotional opportunity moving to a chief’s position in a larger agency. However, in other situations such as Costa Mesa, California, the chief resigned citing interference in police department operations by the city council on a continuing basis. The chief’s frustration is apparent in a letter to his staff explaining his resignation: “If you let council people meddle in such small matters, is it long before they tell us who we can cite, or arrest, or require us to release or whose burg gets investigated? It is simply a step to corruption and I won’t play in that arena.”¹[sic]

The police chief in Buena Vista, Virginia, resigned in 2010 explaining that “. . . keeping my integrity is a better option than keeping my job.”² He further reported that an elected official repeatedly tried to get him to “violate the trust of victims”.³

Comments such as these with respect to elected officials are not beneficial to the individual as to subsequent employment opportunities for police chief positions. However, it is apparent by the increasing number of similar comments by law enforcement administrators that the underlying reasons for police chief turnover often relate to the inability to perform the job without interference from elected officials.

Police Chief Turnover

The turnover in police chiefs is not a new development. For example, between 1987 and 1992 the heads of police departments in 41 of the 50 largest cities in the country either resigned or were dismissed, according to an analysis by the Police Executive Research Forum in Washington, D.C. Thirteen cities replaced their chiefs twice in that time, and Chicago, San Francisco, and Dallas each had three different police executives.⁴

A police chief is without question one of the most visible positions in a governmental agency. The chief has to be accessible and accountable all the time. Joseph D McNamara, the

retired police chief of San Jose, California, who has a Ph.D. and is a research fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, comments with respect to the chief's position: "The chief has to be a person with vision, a manager, a leader and an interpreter of political policy."⁵

Dr. McNamara's comment with respect to political policy directly relates to the difficulties encountered by police chiefs coping with shrinking budgets and responding to conflicting demands. The recent termination of a police chief in Oakland, California, a city with one of the highest violent crime rates in the country, is a case in point with respect to the situation which seems to be a major cause as to why top cops are leaving their positions in increasing numbers.

The Oakland, California Police Department

Oakland, California, has a population of approximately 400,000. It is the eighth largest city in California. Crime has historically been a problem for the city which has one of the highest per capita homicide rates in the nation. The FBI's annual Uniform Crime Report lists Oakland on a continuing basis near the top in city crime rankings.⁶

In 2004 the citizens of Oakland approved Measure Y known as The Violence Prevention and Public Safety Act. The Measure provided for approximately 19 million dollars every year for 10 years to fund violence protection programs including the addition of new police officer positions. The authorized strength of police officer positions increased to 802 officers after the passage of Measure Y. However, following a budget shortfall and the inability to appropriate funding consistent with the Measure Y legislation, the City of Oakland stopped collecting Measure Y funds as of July 1, 2010. Subsequent budget reductions, including layoffs, have resulted in 637 authorized police officer positions effective July 2011.⁷

The police department budget issue and high crime rate has presented the Chief of Police with a considerable challenge with respect to the structuring of the organization and services provided by the police department. The most recent police chief, appointed in 2009 after serving as police chief in Long Beach, California, for seven years, recommended that curfews and gang injunctions be used as tools when necessary to assist in reducing the high rate of crime.⁸ However, the mayor and a majority of the city council, who had their own ideas on how to best address the spiraling crime rate, did not take action with respect to the police chief's recommendations.⁹ One discouraged member of the council stated: "Everyone on the council believes Oakland has a crime problem and everyone believes kids need to be safe, but we're not willing to adopt tools that are commonly used in other jurisdictions to help promote safety."¹⁰ Another member of the council commented: "There are folks in this building (City Hall) who think they know more about policing than the police chief."¹¹

A local journalist, with respect to Oakland's elected officials, commented: "Oakland residents aren't going to benefit from more police on the street as long as sound law enforcement measures are delayed, watered down or simply shelved to meet the political sensibilities of some of the city's leaders."¹²

The police chief resigned the week following the city council meeting commenting that he had "limited control but full accountability . . . for making the streets of Oakland safe."¹³

The recent resignation of the police chief follows the resignations of his two immediate predecessors for the same or similar reasons – elected officials involvement in running the police department. When the previous chief resigned he said that the city council was ". . . paying lip service to their commitment to public safety."¹⁴

Oakland has had six police chiefs since 1998.

Turnover – Impact on Organization

Governmental entities throughout the country are experiencing fiscal constraints resulting from the economic recession. Public safety as a general rule has been exempt from budget and staffing reductions. It is apparent that the police department funding issue in Oakland has become the norm in the public sector. Public safety budgets are no longer sacred. On October 24, 2011, the Justice Department delivered a report at the annual International Association of Chiefs of Police Conference in Chicago that put law enforcement on pace for its first job decline in 25 years. The report concluded by identifying that "the effects of the economic downturn on law enforcement agencies may be felt for the next five to 10 years, or worse, permanently."¹⁵

Elected officials need to understand and accept the fact that they must rely upon the education, experience, and training of their top cops as to how to best run a law enforcement agency. The "revolving door" for police chiefs in Oakland, California has come at the expense of the community. The inability of an organization to move ahead is badly affected because of continuing change and inconsistency at the top.

The continued loss of police chiefs poses a serious challenge to instilling continuity in police departments. Consequently, process knowledge is often lost, leadership is in a continuing flux, and focus on the long-term disappears. There is also an impact on morale and motivation within the organization which has a continuing impact on daily activities.

Conclusion

It is not unusual when police chiefs seek career opportunities in law enforcement that provide greater challenges and more responsibility. However, it is unusual when police chiefs

speak more openly with respect to the involvement of elected officials in police department operations. By openly addressing frustrations, police chiefs may be limiting their opportunities to be the top law enforcement officer in another public sector agency. Consequently, they move on to private sector positions, education, or other employment resulting in a serious loss to the public sector.

One of the primary goals of public service is to serve the public interest by ensuring that the best possible services are provided. It is time for elected officials to stop meddling in administrative matters and to focus on formulating policies and services beneficial to the public.

Elected officials have an important role in representing the electorate to the best of their ability. However, it is essential in these difficult times that they work as a team with top administrators in the organization in addressing the needs of the community.

Unpublished manuscript
2011

¹ John Canalis, Mona Shadia, "Costa Mesa Police Chief Resigns in Protest," *Daily Pilot*, (21 June 2011): 2.

² "UPDATED: Former Buena Vista Police Chief Explains Resignation," *Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police*, (July 2010).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Joseph B. Treaster, "Brown Resignation Highlights High Turnover Among Chiefs," *New York Times*, (8 August 1992).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Crime in the United States 2009," United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Criminal Justice Services Division.

⁷ 2011 – 13 City of Oakland, California, Budget.

⁸ Martha Kuruvila, "Hot Debate Expected on Crime Measures," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (5 October 2011): C2.

⁹ Marthai Kuruvila, Henry K. Lee, Demian Bulwa, "Oakland Police Chief Quits," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (12 October 2011): A13.

¹⁰ Chip Johnson, "Council Won't Give Police Help They Need," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (4 October 2011): C1, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Chip Johnson, "Quan an Obstacle to Police Chief's Plans." *San Francisco Chronicle*, (30 August 2011): C1, 4.

¹³ Marthai Kuruvila, Henry K. Lee, Demian Bulwa, "Oakland Police Chief Quits," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (12 October 2011): A1.

¹⁴ Henry K. Lee, Christopher Heredia, "Oakland Police Chief to Resign," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (28 January 2009).

¹⁵ Kevin Johnson, David Jackson, "Weak Economy Forces Cuts, Squeezes Police Departments." *USA Today*, (24 October 2011): 2A.