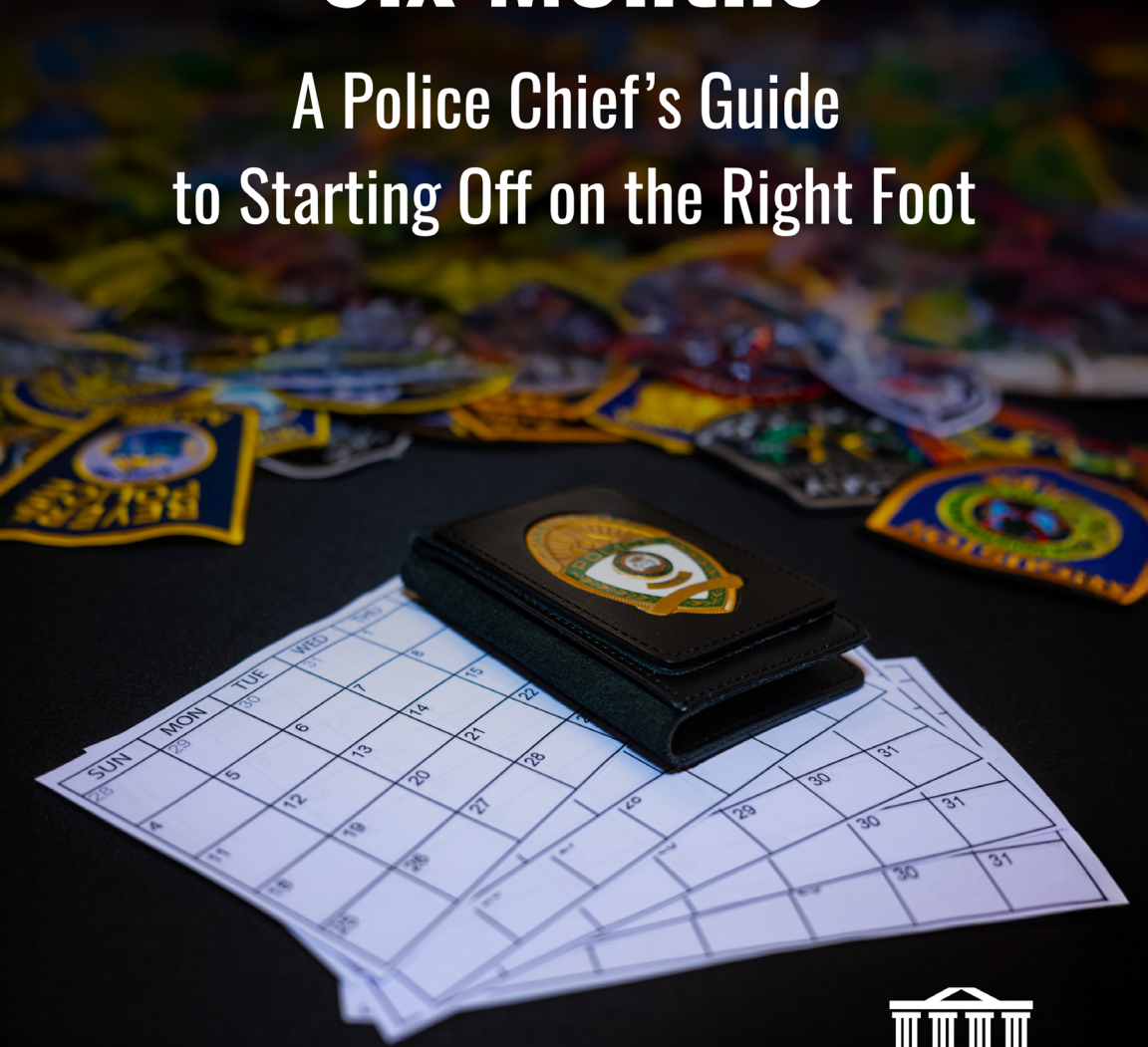


Critical Issues in Policing

The First Six Months

A Police Chief's Guide
to Starting Off on the Right Foot



POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM

Critical Issues in Policing

The First Six Months

**A Police Chief's Guide
to Starting Off on the Right Foot**

May 2025



**POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM**

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A Message from Executive Director Chuck Wexler

Fresh from her installation ceremony, a new police chief is just settling into her office when the head of Internal Affairs asks for a few minutes and closes the door. He is carrying a box of reports, which he places on the chief's desk. "Chief, your predecessor has been sitting on these cases for months, and you need to make some decisions." The chief learns that one of the investigations involves a popular member of the department who was promoted to a command position by the last chief just weeks before he retired.

In another community, the new sheriff is making the rounds meeting with groups of deputies. One particularly outspoken group says that officer morale is the lowest it has been in years. To help turn the situation around, they encourage the sheriff to loosen the department's restrictive vehicle pursuit policy, saying that it will send an immediate message to deputies that the new sheriff "gets it" and has their backs.

In other communities:

- A new chief comes into a department where his predecessor was revered by both officers and the community. Within the first month, the chief proposes to change the department's long-standing badge and patch and to rename or discontinue popular programs.

- A new sheriff, elected on a platform to make substantial changes, begins her first message to the agency by emphasizing the need to “reform” the organization and overhaul its “culture.” She assesses the department to be a “B-agency” at best.
- Another chief, making the move from a medium-sized agency in the Midwest to a large department on the West Coast, suddenly faces the dual challenges of not only leading a department but also finding a home he can afford and schools that are a good fit for his children.

Then, there is the chief who is promoted from within the agency with the mandate to “shake things up” in a department that has grown complacent. He is popular with rank-and-file and agency leadership alike—members of the command staff still call him by his first name. But just a few weeks into his tenure, he is confronted with a questionable officer-involved shooting that has angered the community and attracted national media attention. To promote transparency, he decides to release the officer’s name and body-worn camera footage. Both the union and command staff say the easygoing colleague they once knew has changed, and a no-confidence vote is planned.

The challenges facing a new police chief or sheriff are myriad and unpredictable. The problem is that there is no playbook for the new chief executive to follow, whether they come from inside or outside the agency. There’s no orientation session or onboarding process that can possibly cover the unique and varied situations new chiefs will confront. And one thing is a given: Within their first few months in office, almost every new chief can expect to face challenges and crises that require quick thinking and nimble decision-making. How the new chief responds to the inevitable crises, as well as to the important decisions they will face in their first few months, will be crucial to their leadership and even, perhaps, to their longevity.

New chiefs will face **operational decisions**, such as assessing organizational strengths, reviewing policies, determining crime-fighting priorities, and figuring out how best to organize the department to address weaknesses and implement strategies. And beyond deciding what needs to change, new chiefs have to figure out when and how to implement those changes. Act too quickly and they may alienate members of the department who



need time to understand and buy into their vision. Act too slowly and they may frustrate community members and political leaders who are clamoring for change.

Chiefs will have to make **personnel decisions**, such as evaluating existing talent and building a leadership team that the chief can trust and work with. Can the new chief bring trusted professionals with them from the outside to help fill critical roles? And if so, how can they integrate these outsiders into the organization without alienating current personnel? If the new chief comes from a right-to-work state, they may have to learn the intricacies of leading a department with a strong union and collective bargaining.

There are **political issues** affecting the chief's relationships with a range of stakeholders, including the mayor, city manager, other elected leaders, the community, and the news media. How the new chief spends their time will say a lot about the chief's personality and priorities. New chiefs have to grapple with finding the right balance between spending time in the community and spending time inside the department, between being open and accessible to the media and coming across as a showboat, and between following the mayor's lead and demonstrating independence in running the department.

And, of course, there are many **personal matters** that new chiefs may need to attend to—relocating to a new city, finding housing, supporting a spouse or partner in their new career, enrolling children in school, and maintaining some semblance of a personal life.

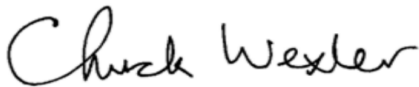
While these and other challenges are at least somewhat foreseeable, there will inevitably be unexpected crises that will test the new chief's strength and judgment. These could range from mass shootings to natural disasters, use-of-force incidents to an officer killed in the line of duty. Forecasting if or when these events may occur is impossible, but everyone will expect the new chief to have the answers.

How a new police chief or sheriff handles the challenges and crises during their first six months can have a lasting and indelible impact on the chief executive's leadership and tenure. One wrong move or poor decision can be devastating to a new chief. There is no magic to the six-month time frame. But experience suggests that six months provides new chiefs with ample time to both learn the ropes and set the tone for their leadership. As such, the first six months serve as a defining moment for new chiefs.

To better understand this critical time period and help new chiefs navigate it, PERF turned to the experts: a cross-section of police leaders who have been there. We conducted in-depth interviews with nearly 30 current and former police chiefs and sheriffs. Most have led more than one agency during their careers, so they were able to draw upon experiences of multiple first six-month periods. We asked about the challenges they faced, the successful strategies they implemented, and the “rookie” mistakes they made.

This publication reflects their experiences and the insights and wisdom they gained from stepping up to lead a police agency. The book also draws upon PERF's own understanding of the issues new chiefs face. Through research, our Executive Search services, and the Senior Management Institute for Police, we have learned about the range of challenges a new chief can expect to face and how they can successfully navigate them. This is an area I have taken a special interest in during my years at PERF. I have worked with countless chiefs before, during, and after their selections, and I have learned much from them about the hiring process.

I am constantly impressed by the men and women who step up and accept the challenge of leading a modern law enforcement agency. Being a chief or sheriff can be taxing, involving long hours, personal sacrifice, and frequent criticism from all sides. But the job can be exceptionally rewarding as well. I hope this book will help recent and future chiefs get off to a good start and enjoy long and successful careers leading our nation's law enforcement agencies.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chuck Wexler". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chuck" and last name "Wexler" clearly legible.

Chuck Wexler
Executive Director

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, PERF thanks the 29 police chiefs and sheriffs—current and retired—who were interviewed for this book. Their experiences and insights form the foundation of this document. (Their names can be found on page 4.) Individually, each of these leaders has a unique story that illustrates the challenges, opportunities, and pitfalls that face new chiefs. Collectively, they bring a wealth of wisdom and experience that all new chiefs can learn from. These women and men are not perfect; they would be the first to acknowledge that. But it is through their mistakes and successes that every new chief can learn.

In selecting the people interviewed for this project, we attempted to assemble a diverse cross-section of police leaders representing different sized agencies, different parts of the country, and different time periods, so that the perspectives here reflect the changes in policing over the years. In addition to these individuals, however, there are many, many others who have shaped our understanding of policing and what it means to be a successful police chief—during the first six months and beyond.

They include Chicago Superintendent Terry Hilliard and Kansas City (Missouri) Chief Rick Easley, who were ahead of their time in dealing with the difficult issues of race and policing; Camden County (New Jersey) Chief Scott Thomson [a past PERF president and Gary P. Hayes Award winner], who turned a dysfunctional police department into a model of community policing; Prince William County (Virginia) Chief Charlie Deane, who never shied away from tough issues such as immigration; Dean Esserman [Gary P. Hayes Award winner], who went from a

young prosecutor to police chief and led reform efforts in a number of police agencies; and Boise (Idaho) Chief Jim Carvino, St. Louis (Missouri) Chief Clarence Harmon, and Kansas City (Missouri) Chief Steve Bishop, all early PERF Board members who helped to set this organization and the profession on a path to success.

Also, Gil Kerlikowske [another past PERF president and Gary P. Hayes Award winner], who served as chief executive in a number of municipal police departments and federal agencies, was never afraid to challenge the unions and deal head-on with national issues such as drugs and immigration. And Bob Olson, who successfully led the police departments in Yonkers (New York) and Minneapolis, served as chief inspector of the Garda Síochána Inspectorate in Dublin, and assisted on groundbreaking PERF projects in Kingston, Jamaica, and in Chicago.

These leaders have had an impact on PERF, and their wisdom and experience have helped shape our understanding of what police leadership is all about. And PERF's current board of directors—Metropolitan Nashville (Tennessee) Chief John Drake, Sacramento (California) Chief Kathy Lester, Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) Commissioner Kevin Bethel, Minneapolis (Minnesota) Chief Brian O'Hara, St. Louis (Missouri) Metropolitan Commissioner Robert Tracy, Elgin (Illinois) Chief Ana Lalley, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Chief Johnny Jennings—continue advancing the profession as the next generation of police leaders.

Finally, we are grateful to the many PERF members who over the years have confided in us the stories and experiences of their first six months. To them, we owe our deep appreciation.

This book, part of PERF's *Critical Issues in Policing* series, represents an important milestone in this long-running project. It is the 53rd Critical Issues report PERF has published since 2000, thanks to the generous and steadfast support of Motorola Solutions and the Motorola Solutions Foundation.



With Motorola's support, PERF has published *Critical Issues* reports on a wide range of issues that have helped police executives and others better understand the policing profession and how to improve it. This series has examined violent crime, community policing, the opioid epidemic, handling of mass demonstrations, police use of force, human trafficking, and many other topics, including a special series of daily reports in 2020 and 2021 on the police response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several *Critical Issues* reports, including this one, have focused on the importance of developing future leaders in policing. (All *Critical Issues* reports are listed on pages 96–98 and available on PERF's website at <https://www.policeforum.org/critical-issues-series>.) As a company built on partnerships with law enforcement, Motorola has always recognized the value of impartial and accessible research and the importance of strong leadership.

PERF extends our sincere thanks to Greg Brown, Motorola Solutions Chairman and CEO. Greg is a remarkable leader whose insights, wisdom, and friendship PERF has come to value and appreciate for many years. Also, we recognize Jack Molloy,

Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer; Jason Winkler, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer; John Zidar, Senior Vice President, North America Government; and Karem Perez, Vice President, Foundation and Global Inclusion. For the support of these individuals and many others over the years, PERF is profoundly grateful.

This project was managed by PERF Senior Communications Principal James McGinty. James helped conduct the interviews with Executive Director Chuck Wexler, and he was the lead writer of the book. PERF's Executive Search team—Charlotte Lansinger, Rebecca Neuberger, Antoinette Tull, and Terry Chowanec—helped to identify the cross-section of chiefs who were interviewed and offered guidance on the topics to be explored. Soline Simenauer, Executive Assistant to the Executive Director, was instrumental in arranging the interviews and keeping the project on track; Editor Melissa Fox edited the book; and Communications Associate Dustin Waters designed it. And former PERF staff member and close friend Kevin Morison provided invaluable insights, advice, and editing.

Introduction

Many people entering new jobs begin with well-established orientation and onboarding processes that often involve detailed employee handbooks, training classes, and shadowing of current employees. Even a chief executive starting at a large company has access to an abundance of resources, including research on what makes a successful CEO and best-selling memoirs by former corporate leaders. But for newly appointed police chiefs or newly elected sheriffs, there is no orientation handbook or ready reference they can call upon to help them get started. The job of chief is often an immediate trial by fire; given the high-profile, high-stakes positions chiefs hold, the “honeymoon period” is often short, if it exists at all.

A new chief or sheriff may reach out to experienced police leaders they know for advice and guidance. But their circle of contacts may be limited, and the experiences of these mentors may not match the environment or particular challenges the new chief is facing in their new community. And no matter how prepared they are, most new police chiefs and sheriffs will experience a few surprises and bumps in the road—often within their first weeks on the job.

To help new chiefs and sheriffs anticipate surprises and set their tenure in the right direction, PERF created this guide focusing on a new chief’s first six months in office. Experience shows that this time period is generally long enough for a chief to establish themselves, assess their agency, articulate a vision, and begin to make changes. At the same time, the first six months can be fraught with risks. Mistakes made during this period—disrespect-

ing a department tradition, mishandling a key personnel or policy decision, or offending the wrong person—can set a new chief back and limit their ability to enact their vision for the agency.

The guide is divided into five chapters, reflecting the most critical areas that new chiefs need to focus on:

1. **Personnel**, which discusses how to assess and build relationships with employees, especially with members of the command staff, other department leaders, and union representatives (if personnel are unionized)
2. **Issues Facing the Agency**, which focuses on the key policies and practices a new chief should review when evaluating their department
3. **Building Relationships**, which covers the relationships new chiefs must develop with external stakeholders, such as political officials, community members, and the news media
4. **Implementing Change**, which offers guidance on setting priorities and balancing time demands when beginning to make changes to an agency
5. **Managing the Personal Changes**, which explores some of the family and other personal challenges a new chief may face, especially if they have been hired from outside the agency

The book concludes with some “rookie mistakes” that experienced police leaders have either made themselves or seen others make, as well as a checklist of recommendations for a new police chief to follow.

How this guide was developed

This guide is the result of interviews with nearly 30 experienced police chiefs and sheriffs, many of whom have led multiple agencies. They spoke about their successes and failures, as well as what they wish they had known before taking their first job as a chief. To provide a cross-section of experiences, PERF interviewed chiefs from agencies of different sizes and from different parts of the country. The book primarily consists of their thoughts in their own words. A list of those interviewed and the positions they have held is available on page 4.

The book also reflects the expertise of PERF's Executive Search team, which conducts searches for police chiefs and other law enforcement executives in agencies across the country. They often stay in close contact with new chiefs they help place and hear about their successes and challenges. The team has decades of experience and a broad, nationwide perspective, so their knowledge and observations were invaluable for this book.

PERF's Senior Management Institute for Police (SMIP), a leadership development program held each summer, was another valuable resource for this book. The SMIP curriculum features lectures by experienced professors in management, organizational development, and other subjects and includes panel discussions with current and former police leaders. The insights from these sessions provided additional real-world direction for this guide.

Inside vs. outside chiefs

Many of the police executives interviewed differentiated between police chiefs and sheriffs who are promoted (or elected) from within the organization ("inside chiefs") and those who come from another agency ("outside chiefs"). When identifying executives to interview for this publication, PERF looked for those who had led multiple organizations and would have advice that is broadly applicable to new police leaders. As a result, the executives interviewed generally had more experience taking over as an outside chief rather than being promoted from within as an inside chief. Some of the guidance in this book is more applicable to outside than to inside chiefs, such as assessing personnel you have just met and identifying local leaders. But much of the advice applies to inside chiefs as well.

Police Leaders Interviewed for this Book

Malik Aziz

- Prince George’s County (Maryland) Police Chief, 2021–present
- Dallas Police Department, 1992–2021
- Dallas County Sheriff’s Department, 1989–1992

Ramon Batista

- Santa Monica (California) Police Chief, 2021–present
- Mesa (Arizona) Police Chief, 2017–2021
- Tucson (Arizona) Police Department, 1986–2017

Kevin Bethel

- Philadelphia Police Commissioner, 2024–present
- Philadelphia School District Chief of School Safety, 2019–2024
- Philadelphia Police Department, 1986–2016

William “Bill” Bratton

- New York City Police Commissioner, 2014–2016
- Los Angeles Police Chief, 2002–2009
- New York City Police Commissioner, 1994–1996
- Boston Police Commissioner, 1993–1994
- New York City Transit Police Chief, 1990–1992
- Massachusetts Metropolitan District Commissioner Police Superintendent, 1986–1990
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority Police Chief, 1983–1986
- Boston Police Department 1970–1983

William “Bill” Brooks

- Norwood (Massachusetts) Police Chief, 2012–2024
- Wellesley (Massachusetts) Police Department, 2000–2012
- Norwood (Massachusetts) Police Department, 1982–2000
- Westwood (Massachusetts) Police Department, 1977–1982

Michael “Mike” Chitwood

- Volusia County (Florida) Sheriff, 2017–present
- Daytona Beach (Florida) Police Chief, 2006–2016
- Shawnee (Oklahoma) Police Chief, 2005–2006
- Philadelphia Police Department, 1988–2005

Michael Cox

- Boston Police Commissioner, 2022–present
- Ann Arbor (Michigan) Police Chief, 2019–2022
- Boston Police Department, 1989–2019

Kevin Davis

- Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Chief, 2021–present
- Baltimore Police Commissioner, 2015–2018
- Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Police Chief, 2013–2014
- Prince George’s County (Maryland) Police Department, 1992–2012

Edward “Ed” Flynn

- Milwaukee Police Chief, 2008–2018
- Springfield (Massachusetts) Police Commissioner, 2006–2008
- Massachusetts Secretary of Public Safety, 2003–2006
- Arlington County (Virginia) Police Chief, 1998–2003
- Chelsea (Massachusetts) Police Chief, 1993–1998
- Braintree (Massachusetts) Police Chief, 1988–1993
- Jersey City (New Jersey) Police Department, 1973–1988
- Hillside Township (New Jersey) Police Department, 1971–1973

Terrance “Terry” Gainer

- U.S. Senate Sergeant at Arms, 2006–2014
- U.S. Capitol Police Chief, 2002–2006
- Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Department, 1998–2002
- Illinois State Police Director, 1991–1998
- Chicago Police Department, 1968–1989

Michael Harrison

- Baltimore Police Commissioner, 2019–2023
- New Orleans Police Superintendent, 2014–2019
- New Orleans Police Department, 1991–2014

Ana Lalley

- Elgin (Illinois) Police Chief, 2018–present
- Elgin (Illinois) Police Department, 1996–2018

Katherine “Kathy” Lester

- Sacramento (California) Police Chief, 2021–present
- Sacramento (California) Police Department, 1994–2021

Robert Luna

- Los Angeles County Sheriff, 2022–present
- Long Beach (California) Police Chief, 2014–2021
- Long Beach (California) Police Department, 1985–2014

J. Thomas “Tom” Manger

- U.S. Capitol Police Chief, 2021–2025
- Montgomery County (Maryland) Police Chief, 2004–2019
- Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Chief, 1998–2004
- Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Department, 1977–1998

Richard “Rick” Myers

- Commerce City (Colorado) Interim Police Chief, 2022–2023
- Newport News (Virginia) Police Chief, 2014–2017
- Sanford (Florida) Interim Police Chief, 2012–2013
- Manitou Springs (Colorado) Interim Police Chief, 2012
- Colorado Springs Police Chief, 2007–2011
- Appleton (Wisconsin) Police Chief, 1995–2007
- Lisle (Illinois) Police Chief, 1991–1995
- Plymouth (Michigan) Police Chief, 1985–1991
- Atlas Township (Michigan) Police Chief, 1984–1985

- Oakland County (Michigan) Sheriff's Office, 1982–1983
- Oak Park (Michigan) Police Department, 1979–1982
- Auburn Hills (Michigan) Police Department, 1977–1979

Stephen “Steve” Mylett

- Worthington (Ohio) Police Chief, 2024–present
- Akron (Ohio) Police Chief, 2021–2023
- Bellevue (Washington) Police Chief, 2015–2021
- Southlake (Texas) Police Chief, 2011–2015
- Corpus Christi (Texas) Police Department, 1989–2011

Paul Noel

- Knoxville (Tennessee) Police Chief, 2022–present
- New Orleans Police Department, 1997–2022

Brian O’Hara

- Minneapolis Police Chief, 2022–present
- Newark (New Jersey) Public Safety Director, 2021–2022
- Newark (New Jersey) Police Department, 2001–2021

Kathleen “Kathy” O’Toole

- Seattle Police Chief, 2014–2018
- Garda Síochána Inspectorate (Ireland) Chief Inspector, 2006–2012
- Boston Police Commissioner, 2004–2006
- Northern Ireland Commission on the Future of Policing, 1998–1999
- Massachusetts Secretary of Public Safety, 1994–1998
- Massachusetts State Police, 1992–1998
- Massachusetts Metropolitan District Commission Police Superintendent, 1990–1991
- Massachusetts Metropolitan District Commission Police, 1986–1990
- Boston Police Department, 1979–1986

Danielle Outlaw

- Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, 2023–present
- Philadelphia Police Commissioner, 2020–2023
- Portland (Oregon) Police Chief, 2017–2019
- Oakland (California) Police Department, 1997–2017

Charles “Chuck” Ramsey

- Philadelphia Police Commissioner, 2008–2016
- Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Chief, 1998–2007
- Chicago Police Department, 1968–1998

Pamela “Pam” Smith

- Punta Gorda (Florida) Police Chief, 2018–present
- Baltimore Police Department, 2016–2017
- Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Acting Police Chief, 2012
- Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Police Department, 1993–2016

Michael Sullivan

- Phoenix Interim Police Chief, 2022–2025
- Baltimore Police Department, 2019–2022
- Louisville (Kentucky) Metro Police Department, 1994–2019

Robert Tracy

- St. Louis (Missouri) Metropolitan Police Chief, 2022–present
- Wilmington (Delaware) Police Chief, 2017–2022
- Chicago Police Department, 2011–2016
- New York City Police Department, 1984–2007

Scott Wahl

- San Diego Police Chief, 2024–present
- San Diego Police Department, 1998–2024

Robert “Bob” Wasserman

- New York City Police Department, 2014–2016
- London Traffic Control Centre, 2010–2011
- Transport for London, 1999–2010
- Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, 1997–1999
- United Nations International Police Task Force in Bosnia, 1996–1997
- Massachusetts Port Authority Director of Public Safety, 1988–1990
- Houston Police Department, 1982–1985
- Boston Police Department, 1973–1978
- Massachusetts State Police, 1971–1973
- Dayton (Ohio) Police Department, 1968–1970

Robert White

- Asheville (North Carolina) Interim Police Chief, 2019–2020
- Denver Police Chief, 2012–2018
- Louisville (Kentucky) Metro Police Chief, 2003–2011
- Greensboro (North Carolina) Police Chief, 1998–2002
- Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Department, 1997–1998
- District of Columbia Housing Authority Office of Public Safety, 1995–1997
- Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Department, 1972–1995

David “Dave” Zibolski

- Fargo (North Dakota) Police Chief, 2020–present
- Beloit (Wisconsin) Police Chief, 2015–2020
- Wisconsin Department of Justice Division of Law Enforcement Services, 2011–2015
- Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Police Department, 1984–2011

Personnel

As best-selling author Jim Collins stresses in his book *Good to Great*, an imperative for any new leader is to “get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats.”¹ In other words, before they can articulate and implement a vision—before they can figure out where to drive the bus, in Collins’s words—leaders need to assemble the right team to help them succeed.

Getting the right people on the bus, situated in the right seats, can be especially challenging for new police chiefs. Unlike a new football coach or corporate CEO, who can typically bring a supporting cast with them, most chiefs have to work with the teams they inherit. (There are examples of new chiefs being able to bring outside personnel with them—see page 23—but these are the exception rather than the rule.) For chiefs hired from the outside, this situation can be daunting. They don’t know the new members of their leadership team, their strengths and weaknesses, or even whether they can always trust the people around them. Some of their command staff members likely competed for the chief’s job themselves and may resent that an outsider was hired.

Even chiefs promoted from within an agency are bound to face challenges in evaluating and assembling their new teams. They likely know and even have worked with members of the leader-

1. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

ship team, but the new chief may face other obstacles in putting together the team they want. These hurdles might include political pressure, labor issues, traditions, and personal friendships.

At the same time new chiefs are working to assemble their leadership teams, they need to focus on introducing themselves to rank-and-file members of the department and to the community as well. These initial introductions are critical to building strong and lasting relationships with people inside and outside the department. (Building relationships with the community is explored on pages 56–58.) In agencies whose members are unionized, chiefs and sheriffs must develop relationships with union leaders during the first few months.

Personnel checklist

- Get to know current command staff members before you start; ask for resumes and written answers to open-ended questions about the department and their roles.
- Identify a trusted department insider you can rely on to help you get up to speed. This individual might be an executive assistant or chief of staff.
- Conduct a thorough assessment before making command staff and other leadership changes. While the window of opportunity to assemble your team won't last forever, don't feel rushed to make personnel changes you may regret later.
- During the hiring process, discuss with the hiring authority the possibility of hiring outside personnel to assist you.
- Review sworn and professional staffing throughout the agency to ensure that all members are being given opportunities for promotions and specialized assignments.
- Introduce yourself through an initial message sharing your values, experience, and goals. Follow that up with as many face-to-face discussions as possible.
- Especially in smaller agencies, make a concerted effort to get to know your employees—their names, families, interests—to the extent possible.
- Understand the role police unions play in your jurisdiction, and begin developing a working relationship with union leaders.

This chapter offers guidance to new chiefs on how to assess and assemble their leadership teams, how to introduce themselves and begin building relationships with employees across the agency, and how to begin working with collective bargaining units.

Assess existing talent

It is particularly challenging for an outside chief to assess existing leadership talent. An inside chief likely has years or decades of experience with fellow department leaders, but an outside chief must rely on their initial impressions and assessment.

There is no foolproof approach to assessing talent and making decisions about command staff and other department leaders. Many of the chiefs interviewed for this project admitted that they have made mistakes in the past. But an organized assessment and selection process can improve a new police chief's decision-making.

Try to get to know your command staff as best you can before starting the job. Most chiefs recommended asking the command staff for resumes and written answers to a few open-ended questions, such as what they think the agency does well and where it falls short. In addition to collecting useful information about the department, this exercise can help reveal current department leaders' critical thinking and communication skills. Follow up these initial communications with one-on-one conversations with all command staff.

Some other recommendations include the following:

- Review sworn and professional staffing to help determine if members are being given opportunities for advancement, to ensure the agency is identifying and supporting its top performers, and to build an organization that is responsive to the community. Investigate further any concerns by speaking with staff and more closely analyzing the data.
- Understand the agency's promotional process and any plans for upcoming promotions.
- Once you arrive, ask for a diagram of the headquarters building with the location of everyone's offices.

“In order to get a first-hand perspective on the agency and critical staff, meaning direct reports, I would sit down with each of them in an informal environment and ask them to tell me about themselves, their families, and their take on the strengths and weaknesses of the department in general. I’d ask them for what I’d call a ‘turnover report’—a written document identifying their area of responsibility, their strategy, goals, and objectives, and, most importantly, any threats on the horizon in the next 30 to 60 days that could impact operations and personnel.”

— Terry Gainer

“If you’re fortunate enough to know someone in the city where you’re taking a job, obviously you should touch base. But you’ll find that people often have their own agendas, and you don’t want to have any. I never wanted to talk about personnel, because I wanted to form my own opinions about individuals.



“I had a little exercise where I had command staff write the major challenges they saw facing the department today, and what they saw as potential solutions. I wanted to know about their writing skills, and that gave me an indication. And I wanted to know their perspective on things as insiders, not only in identifying problems, but also coming up with potential solutions.

“Then I sat down and had one-on-one interviews where we talked about those problems and solutions, other issues, and their backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses.”

— Chuck Ramsey

“One of the big challenges is you don’t know all these folks and you’re trying to get to know them. Some of them, if not many of them, have agendas or goals or things they want to accomplish. So sometimes you’re not getting complete honesty. You start to ask ‘why’ questions, and you don’t always get direct answers. I think it just takes a long time to figure out who is a legitimate player from a leadership and cultural perspective, and who’s trying to gain for themselves.”

— Dave Zibolski



“Schedule as many conversations as you can with people in your organization. Have one-on-one time with at least the first two levels of senior leaders, then perhaps talk to the rest in smaller groups.

“You begin to get a sense of your people and the organization. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the organization? What do I need to attend to first?”

“Very quickly you find out what the issues are. You find out the officers’ issues and the political issues, and you find out the internal political dynamics of the agency. And you get a sense of how reform should unfold.”

— Ed Flynn

“I learn by asking a lot of questions. I tell people not to assume that I disagree with what they’re doing or think they’re doing something flawed just because I asked about it.

“But there’s one answer I will never accept: ‘We’ve always done it that way.’ After a few weeks, I’ll ask people questions and they’ll stop themselves before they give that answer. And they get it; if they can’t explain why they’re doing something, they need to rethink what they’re doing.”

— Rick Myers



“Do what [former NYPD consultant] John Linder calls a ‘cultural diagnostic.’ I do a cultural diagnostic in every department I go into to find out about the current culture of the organization. What is the culture at various levels of that organization. It is done through focus groups, voluntary surveys, and reading articles that have been written about the department.”

— Bill Bratton



“It’s important to connect with your administrative assistant. If you’re walking in and don’t know anybody else in the organization, that needs to be a go-to person who you can trust. You’ll rely on that person a lot.

“And I’ve found that those folks often have a long history with the organization. They’ve sat in the chief’s office many times and seen many transitions.

They just sit there quietly and have more knowledge than you’d believe. They’ve seen any drama that’s gone on with previous administrations and know the personalities.”

— Michael Sullivan

Transition Teams

Bob Wasserman helped many outside chiefs get up to speed before taking over an agency, including Bill Bratton in New York City and Los Angeles; James Craig in Detroit; Mike Berkow in Savannah, Georgia; George Gascón in San Francisco; Ed Flynn in Milwaukee; Ian Blair in London; and Bob Tracy in St. Louis. While his work encompassed the entirety of the transition, much of it pertained to personnel. Wasserman told PERF about his approach to preparing a chief to take over a new department.

“When I helped with a transition, I’d ask all department leaders for their résumés, then I’d interview them one-on-one. I’d ask them to tell me a bit about their past, which draws them out about their families and whatever else is important to them. I’d ask what’s working and what isn’t. I’d ask what decisions have to be made in the first few months. I’d ask what strategies the department has used to address crime, and which of those has and has not seemed to work. And I’d asked about the department’s relationships with the community and what challenges the agency currently faces.

“I’d generally interview the head of the union to get their sense of things.

“I’d also get information that would be useful to the chief. How is the department using overtime? What studies of the department have been done in the last five years? What is the current organizational chart, and how has that organizational chart changed over the past five years? What are the crime trends? What is the department’s performance management system?

“I’d look at the recruit and in-service training curriculum. I’d get plans of the department’s buildings, including where everyone is located, so the new chief knows whose office is where. I’d ask about all the facilities managed by the department. I would collect contact information for relevant state and federal criminal justice executives.



Wasserman

“I’d ask the head of internal affairs for a summary of all active cases and where they stand.

“And I’d collect news articles about the department from the past year, so the new chief can see what’s being said about the department.”

Bill Bratton shared why he liked using a transition team.

“When putting that leadership team together, you have to learn about people in the organization. To do so, I used a combination of an outsider and an insider. Bob

Wasserman was my outsider in every department I came into. I teamed him up with an insider in the organization who was going to be a significant player in my command staff, and who I believed was frustrated with the way things were.

“They’d ask every person in the department’s leadership to submit a resume. You’d see their writing skills, ask them for their ideas about what changes needed to occur in the department, and how they’d implement those changes. That’s where we’d start identifying people who would embrace the idea of change.”

Assemble your team

Once a chief has made their initial assessment of the command staff and other department leaders, the hard work begins of assembling the leadership team. In other words, the new chief needs to figure out who belongs on the bus and what their seat assignments are.

“Come in knowing the team you need to assemble. What are you looking to do with the organization? What is the vision? What are the strategies necessary to achieve that vision? What are the tactics? Then identify the people in the organization who can help create, lead, and implement that vision, using those strategies and tactics.”

— **Bill Bratton**



“Culturally, in our organization, when you’ve had a good career, been a successful cop, and worked a variety of assignments, toward the end of your career you’ve earned the right to be in a senior role and glide into retirement. I’m looking through a different lens. I’m looking for a team player who is willing to spend the last few years of their career working harder than they’ve ever worked before. But they have to be a good fit. I don’t want ‘yes men’ or ‘yes women’; I want people who are going to challenge me but, at the end of the day, I need team players who will work together to see my vision through.”

— **Scott Wahl**



“When you’re trying to move a big organization, you need input from your team and you have to build that team environment. That was something I think I did very well from the beginning. We got everyone on board and made sure we didn’t have anyone at the command level who would undermine the organization.”

— Kathy Lester

“You shouldn’t promote right away. You should always take as long as you can to evaluate, because if someone’s not showing their true self, it’s tougher to sustain over a longer period of time. Once you make that decision, it’s tough to undo that.”

— Robert Tracy

“You have to develop a ‘change team.’ I call them ‘inside outsiders.’ These are people in the organization who care about it, know it has to be fixed, and know they can’t [be the one to] do it. They know what desperately needs to be done, and that they need an outside person to accomplish those things.”

— Ed Flynn

“When we have a group discussion about promotions, I have everyone first write down who they would recommend we promote. That avoids contagious or group thinking. I tell them that they’re all human and the loudest personality in the room would otherwise take over, so that’s how I give everyone a voice. And they love it.”

— Kevin Davis

“If you’re an insider, fight that urge to make decisions based on the personalities you know— ‘I like this guy’ and ‘I don’t like this guy.’ Who I have dinner with and socialize with is totally different from what we do at work. As long as you can do the job, treat folks with respect, and don’t mistreat the public or your employees, how I feel about you personally doesn’t matter.”

— Chuck Ramsey

“Usually the first suck-ups to come up to you when you’re the new chief are the last people you want representing your new era of change. They’re the people who know how to cozy up and take care of themselves. If you reward that behavior, you’ve already compromised yourself.

“You’re looking for the person who sizes you up to see if you’re legit too. They’ve spent their lives in that organization, and when the time comes for you to go, they’re still going to be there. So before they commit, they need to get a sense that you’re real.”

— Ed Flynn

“There are two kinds of horses: show horses and work horses. When you first get there, all the show horses are out there. You can make a mistake by putting a show horse in a position, only to discover that they can’t really do the job. So you want to move quickly, because that window of opportunity starts to close, but you want to be cautious with your moves.”

— Mike Chitwood



“You’re going to discover who, in their mind, was the heir apparent and resents you being there. In the first couple weeks, I’ll say to that person, ‘I know how hurt you are, but let’s both make our best effort to form a team and get something done.’ When someone has been some place 20 or 25 years, they’ve earned the right to demonstrate that they can get on board with you. If they demonstrate that they have no intention of doing that, then you can take action.”

— Rick Myers

“I don’t think there’s an exact time frame, but the window of opportunity for change does not stay open forever, and you have to be cognizant of that.

I made my first command staff changes at about the five-month mark. I had enough time to get my head around the major issues in the department, interviewed everyone who needed to be interviewed, and had a pretty good sense of who needed to be placed where.”

— Chuck Ramsey



“When I came into Prince George’s County [Maryland], I said, ‘We’re not going to make any major changes here for a minimum of 90 days.’ I told everybody, ‘Don’t be scared. You’re not losing your job. I’m not looking to demote you. I’m not making any transfers. We’re going to have some meetings. I’m going to talk to you and get to know you. I’m going to get information about what’s going on here and know more about this department.’”

— Malik Aziz

Bringing in Outside Personnel

If a chief is coming from outside the agency, they may want to bring additional outsiders with them to help bring new perspectives to the leadership team and diversify the team's level and types of experiences. Several chiefs recommended bringing in additional personnel from outside the agency if possible, but they recognized that may not always be an option because of civil service rules or the hiring authority's expectations.

When considering outside personnel to bring with them, new chiefs should look beyond sworn personnel to lead operational units. Depending on the agency's existing capacity, experienced professional staff may be especially helpful in areas such as information technology, research and policy development, crime analysis, curriculum development and training, and public information.

If a chief is coming from outside an agency and is interested in bringing in additional outsiders, they should raise this possibility during the final stages of the hiring process and develop an understanding on the topic before accepting the position.

Kathy O'Toole: "To the greatest extent possible, insist on bringing your own team on board. Many people will be team players, but avoid those who don't align with your vision and could potentially undermine you and your organization.

"In Seattle, I told the city I wasn't interested unless I could establish my own team, and the city council passed an ordinance allowing me to bring people from the outside into sworn positions. I didn't make any impulsive decisions; I waited three to six months to see what the people there were capable of. Then we advertised the positions and received lots of applications. I was able to keep and promote some people internally who really impressed me early on, and I was able to bring others from the outside into sworn and nonsworn positions.

“We ended up with an incredible command staff that was highly diverse, not just in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, but also in terms of professional, educational, and lived experience. I think it’s best to have a blended team with people who know the organization well, as well as others who haven’t spent their whole careers in the same organization and can bring new perspectives.”

Malik Aziz: “I didn’t have anybody who could speak my language, and I needed that. So I brought in Vernon Hale, who became my second-in-command. I worked with him in Dallas for 25 years, then he was the chief in Galveston, Texas, before joining me in Prince George’s County [Maryland].”

Ramon Batista: “I did not bring in an outsider to help with my transition, and I should have worked something out to be able to have that. Because in a big city, you often have the ability to bring things to the table that will help you be more successful in the long run.”



Introduce yourself and begin building relationships

During their first few weeks and months new chiefs are rightly focused on getting to know, assessing, and building their leadership teams. But they also need to devote time and energy to introducing themselves to the organization as a whole. The old adage “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” applies to all new chiefs but especially to those who are coming from outside the agency. People throughout the organization are likely to be skeptical about the newcomer. Easing their anxieties while beginning to introduce your vision for the future of the agency is critical.

Some chiefs, especially in large agencies, have found it helpful to send an initial email or video message to introduce themselves to their employees and explain their experience, values, and expectations. Doing so can also help dispel any rumors circulating about the new chief. And an initial message can be used to encourage members of the department to introduce themselves to the new chief and begin sharing their thoughts on the future of the agency.

Initial electronic communications should be followed up with in-person, face-to-face meetings to the extent possible. In the first few months, chiefs should attend roll calls, ride along with officers, hold employee meetings, or conduct office hours. Employees should not be left feeling that the only time they hear from the new chief is through email or video. Especially in smaller agencies, personal outreach by the new chief is extremely important.

In interviews, chiefs emphasized the importance of getting to know and building relationships with other individuals and groups connected to the department. These groups and individuals include unions, formal or informal officers’ associations, past chiefs or sheriffs, and retiree organizations.



“When you come in from the outside, employees experience a great deal of anxiety, concern, and excitement because they don’t know what they are getting. For some they want something different than what they had in terms of leadership in the organization; for others not so much. In all three departments where I was

the guy hired from the outside, after it was announced I was the incoming chief, I wrote a personal letter to the department describing who I am, what my values are, my professional experience, my faith, and information about my family. I found that people appreciated that I took the time to introduce myself in such a way and make myself a little vulnerable. The effort paid off, because I was building relationships even before I arrived.”

— Steve Mylett



“Don’t be surprised when your new department has a read on you; the profession is inquisitive and suspicious by nature. So be positive from the beginning, and soon after arriving send a personal, professional message to the department stating who you are, your values and principles, what’s important to you, and your expectations of every person in the agency.”

— Terry Gainer



“I had 18 years’ experience in Norwood [Massachusetts], then went to Wellesley [Massachusetts] for 12, then back to Norwood. So when I came back to Norwood, I knew about one-third of the department. I had someone send me the names and photos from all the personnel’s ID cards, and, over the two months before I started, I memorized the department.

“At the first roll call, I went around the room and rattled off their names. And every time I passed somebody in the hallway, I called them by name.

They never figured out how I did that, but after six months I told them I had the ID photos and memorized the names. So I told them how I cheated, but I think they felt positively that I had made such an effort.

“I wanted to meet with everybody and talk to everybody. I started by calling people and telling people I saw to stop by my office. That didn’t go incredibly well because I was busy. So I asked my secretary to schedule three interviews a day until I was done.

“When I met with everybody, I had a pad with talking points about three or four things I expected of them—appearance, respect for the community, commitment to service, open communication, etc. Then I’d ask them what they do and don’t like about working here. I wrote down what they said and let them see me writing it down. So I wasn’t just listening to them; I was taking notes.

“And I’d ask them to tell me a little about themselves and their families. They’d tell me the names of their spouses and kids, and when they left, I would create a contact for them in my phone and note those names. Then, when I met their families, I could call everyone by name. Again, I think people understood how I cheated the system to do that, but I think they appreciated the effort.”

— Bill Brooks

“When I arrived at my second chief job, a consultant had done an organizational analysis and laid everything out. He said, ‘Do not let the employees get to know you,’ and that was the worst advice I was ever given.

“The more I talked with employees, went on ride-alongs with them, and opened up with them, the more I became a human being. If they had a question, they could ask it to my face, rather than go to the rumor mill. I think I did much better connecting with employees when I realized they had to get to know me, and I had to get to know them.”

— Rick Myers

“You’re trying to balance a lot of constituencies—your new mayor, the community, the press. But you can’t forget about the officers. You have to make sure you’re hitting the roll calls and trying to get out to see them. That constituency is probably the most important constituency, and you can get distracted very easily.”

— Robert Tracy

“I’d have 12 cops come from all over the city to have pizza and sit around and talk in my office. Most cops never get into the chief’s office, and they’d come in for free pizza and coke and talk about their gripes.”

— Bill Bratton

“I send an email to the department every Friday. Those generally include something about changes that have recently happened or might be coming, ‘atta boys,’ and insight into what’s on my mind. That is a forum for me to communicate directly to the entire department as transparently and consistently as possible and give our employees a better sense of where I stand on issues that affect them.

“Early on, I started those Friday messages, went to roll calls, and communicated candidly with my command staff, but I found that when my message trickled down to the lieutenants, who are the middle managers, it wasn’t very clear or had been distorted. I learned that I needed to be intentional about speaking directly to our lieutenants and the other informal leaders within our organization to spread my message effectively and with credibility more widely within the department.”

— Paul Noel

“I went back and read an old department yearbook. I started looking at the history of the department, how it was formed, and what the patch meant. I started talking about those things, and I tried to instill pride from the culture that was here years before I was.”

— Malik Aziz

“I scripted out who I needed to meet with on day one. I had my command staff. I wanted to make sure I was meeting with professional staff. Don’t ignore your civilian staff; they are critically important. So make sure you acknowledge them and make time for them. And you have to connect with labor unions early and often as well.”

— Michael Sullivan



“Don’t only meet with the union. You have to meet with the union, but there are other groups that you have to acknowledge and meet with as well. If there’s a Black officers’ group or association, a group for female officers, or a group for LGBTQ officers, break bread with them. Even if there aren’t formal groups, there may be informal groups.”

“Break bread with the living former police chiefs and commissioners as well. I’m always surprised by the number of chiefs who come from the outside and do not call their predecessor. You have to do it, even if they are considered ‘disliked.’ They almost all say something that will be helpful.”

“And I always tell my predecessors that I will never badmouth their tenure. I’m never going to say, ‘I fixed everything,’ because that’s not true. They did good things, and I hope I’m going to do good things.”

“And go to a retiree association meeting early on.”

— Kevin Davis

Work with unions

Working with a police union can be challenging even for experienced chiefs. For new chiefs, especially those who previously worked in non-union agencies, the learning curve can be steep—and truncated. Union leaders will scrutinize everything a new chief does and not hesitate to comment publicly about what they don't like. It is essential for new chiefs to get to know union leaders, open up lines of communication, and build a working relationship with them.

New chiefs and sheriffs should learn more broadly about the role police unions play in the jurisdiction, as well as the history of the relationship between the unions and department leaders. The role of unions can vary widely from city to city, so an outside chief should not assume that unions in the new city will function the same way they did in their previous city.



“I think it’s very important to maintain constructive relationships with unions. I’m not saying you should be in their pocket, but you need to maintain strong lines of communication and work collaboratively to the greatest extent possible. You’ll inevitably disagree at times, but it’s best to do so respectfully. In my various roles, I communicated with union leadership as frequently as I did with some of the members of my own command staff.”

— Kathy O’Toole

“I’ve seen people have trouble because they got into a public fight with the union instead of taking the time to sit down with them. You’re probably going to disagree on about 80 percent of the issues, but that leaves 20 percent you agree on. What are those, and how can you work together? That’s how you build a relationship.”

— Chuck Ramsey



“One of the first things I did in Montgomery County [Maryland] was meet with the union to try to establish a relationship, but that meeting went poorly from the start. I did the exact same thing at the U.S. Capitol Police, and it went great. So get to know the union and its history so you know what you might expect from them.”

— Tom Manger

“If you work with unions, you should understand union contracts, the law, and how officer discipline is handled.”

— Ana Lalley

“I wouldn’t say my relationship with the union in Anne Arundel County [Maryland] was adversarial, but they had a lot of power. They had the ability to make things very difficult for me with a lot of appeals and grievances.

Here in Florida, when I have to administer discipline, they can appeal the decision or file a grievance. But they do so far less frequently than the union did in Anne Arundel County. When I got here, I found the contract was not super strong, compared to what I was used to. So it was easier to deal with the unions here than in Maryland.

“Any chief who goes into a new state, or even a new department, should really try to establish a relationship with their union representatives and understand the union dynamics. I would set up regular meetings. Some chiefs set up weekly meetings, and my union representative knows I have an open door.”

— Pamela Smith

Making Leadership Changes in the Minneapolis Police Department after the Murder of George Floyd

In the summer of 2020, a Minneapolis police officer's murder of George Floyd led to months of demonstrations and rioting in the city and international attention on the police department. PERF spoke with Minneapolis Chief Brian O'Hara, who took over the agency as an outsider in November 2022, about leading under those extraordinary circumstances. He described how he came to the conclusion that wholesale changes were needed in the department's command staff.

Brian O'Hara: "I don't know that these lessons would apply elsewhere, but it was challenging to deal with the trauma and hurt among both the cops and the community.

"When I arrived, morale in the department was abysmally low. Hundreds of officers had left, and those who remained constantly asked me, 'When are you going to fire the entire command staff?' They were frustrated and told me, 'If anybody asks about becoming a cop here, we tell them not to come. Everybody's leaving. Everybody hates us.' This sentiment was widespread.



“Crime was spiraling out of control, and police-community relations were in shambles. Internally, the department was a mess.

“It took me about six months to realize that to move forward, I had to make significant changes in the command staff. Officers were deeply hurt by what happened in 2020 and felt that leadership hadn’t been held accountable. Their perception was that those at the top weren’t present or supportive during the crisis, and that lower-level officers bore the brunt of the fallout.

“As an outsider, I initially approached this with the mindset of giving people a fair chance, saying, ‘I’m not from here. I don’t have previous relationships, and I’ll judge you based on your performance moving forward.’

“But I realized that for the good of the organization, I had to make a clean break from those who were in charge in 2020. It wasn’t about loyalty or hard work—it was about moving forward with a fresh start.

“One of the biggest challenges was dealing with the complex hurt from both the community and the officers. I believed that presence was key. I intentionally made myself visible in the community and at crime scenes. I try to be present at every murder and critical incident, and regularly go out on patrol. I do this because I understand that a big part of the officers’ pain is rooted in the perception that leadership wasn’t present or caring during the toughest times.”

Issues Facing the Agency

Every police agency has vulnerabilities or areas where improvements are needed. For agencies that are bringing in an outside chief, these issues are likely more widespread, challenging, and urgent than for agencies promoting an inside chief. For new chiefs to hit the ground running, they must recognize what issues need the most attention right away and begin developing a game plan for addressing them.

This process should start well before the new chief's first day in office. During the interview process and continuing after accepting a position, a new police chief should begin researching the issues facing the agency they will be leading. In some cases, these issues will be obvious, such as a high-profile use-of-force case that led to the previous chief's departure or a major scandal in a specialized unit. Other issues may be less obvious, such as a long-standing department practice—a relaxed vehicle pursuit policy, for example—that no one recognizes as a liability.

Police leaders interviewed by PERF said a new police chief or sheriff should give priority to researching and assessing those policies and issues that present the greatest risk and exposure, including the following:

- Use-of-force policy and training
- Vehicular pursuit policy and training
- Recruit and in-service training philosophy and curriculum
- Processes for handling community complaints and investigating misconduct allegations
- Investigative practices

- Evidence control and processes for managing department money and property
- Recent critical incidents
- Key upcoming decisions
- Agency finances
- Agency staffing levels and trends

In addition to internal policies and procedures, new chiefs need to understand and assess issues related to the department's relationship with the community and other key stakeholders. (These issues are covered in greater depth beginning on page 49.)

Key issues checklist

- Begin researching key issues facing the agency well before your first day on the job.
- Compare agency policies with national best practices to identify weaknesses and vulnerabilities.
- When assessing key issues, chiefs promoted from within the agency may want to bring in an outside entity to provide a fresh perspective.
- Make use-of-force and vehicle pursuit policies a top priority for immediate review.
- Conduct a thorough review of recruit and in-service training, including by attending some classes.
- Review the misconduct complaint process to ensure it is viewed as fair by both officers and the community.
- Conduct a top-to-bottom review of the evidence and property function and internal controls over department resources.
- Develop a list of key decisions that will need to be made in the short term.
- Get an overview of the agency's finances, staffing, and the budgetary process.

Overall policy review

Police chiefs interviewed for this project identified some of the key policies a new chief should prioritize for immediate review. They should compare these policies with national best practices and identify and catalog the policies' weaknesses or vulnerabilities.

“You can’t assume things are running smoothly or functioning well. From day one, the responsibility is yours—and you wear all of it. That includes what you saw and, just as importantly, what you missed. The buck stops with you immediately.”

— Brian O’Hara

“Some of the issues you really need to pay attention to are your use-of-force policies, your accountability systems, how you’re handling citizen complaints, the storage and handling of evidence, and off-duty employment policies.”

— Kathy O’Toole



“Our code of conduct and many of our general orders were very antiquated, so we started diving into those policies almost immediately. We focused initially on the most important policies, such as use of force, vehicle pursuits, and truthfulness. Early on in my tenure, we also voluntarily participated in an in-depth department assessment that dove into all our policies. That provided us with a road map to quickly implement necessary changes to our policies and procedures.”

— Paul Noel



“I look at whether an agency is accredited. If they aren’t, why not? I look at use of force, including pursuits. I look at how they handle domestic violence cases. I look at how they handle crimes against children and sex crimes cases. I look at strategies on violent crime. Community engagement is another big thing. And I look at training.”

— Mike Chitwood

“Coming from the inside, you know the organization and the issues. But because you’ve been in the organization, you can’t really see whether or not it’s operating at the level it should be operating, and if it reflects best practices. Because when you’re part of it, you don’t see it in an objective way. I would suggest an inside chief have an outside entity come in and do a top-to-bottom assessment of the department and its strengths and weaknesses. There is no such thing as a perfect police department, so there’s always room for improvement.”

— Chuck Ramsey



“I look at whether we’re using the best practices that I’m aware of, and if we’re doing something different, I ask why. Tell me why you’re doing this. I don’t come into a place and say they need to do it a certain way. I ask for an explanation, because sometimes they can educate me. Maybe what I’ve been used to is a good practice, but they can articulate why what they’re doing is also a good practice. There may be agreements they have with the state or their local prosecutor’s office. If it’s something I don’t need to change, I don’t change it. If it’s something that I think needs to be changed, I’ll have a conversation with them and explain why back to them.”

— Robert Tracy

Use of force and vehicle pursuits

Many experienced police executives said that a policy review should begin with the use-of-force policy. PERF has done extensive work on use-of-force policy and training, including the 2016 *Guiding Principles on Use of Force* report² and the Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) training.³ These and other resources can provide a baseline for new chiefs to evaluate their agencies' use-of-force policies and practices.

In addition, a new chief should pay attention to the agency's vehicle pursuit policy, as it carries considerable liability risks and has the potential to impact both officer and community safety. PERF has developed national guidance on pursuit policies, as well, which new chiefs should consult when conducting a review.⁴

"I think it's important to understand how officers are being trained to deal with situations where the public is resistant to interaction. What is the culture on responding to someone who is exhibiting their constitutional right not to engage with the police?"

"In situations when force is needed to hold onto somebody or take somebody into custody, how do patrol officers take that person into custody? Those situations can lead to injuries for the person being detained or the officer making the detention, and they can lead to complaints and a bad picture or video."

— Ramon Batista

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2. PERF (Police Executive Research Forum), *Guiding Principles on Use of Force* (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2016), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/guidingprinciples1.pdf>.
 3. PERF (Police Executive Research Forum), "ICAT: Integrating Assessment, Communications, and Tactics," accessed March 19, 2025, <https://www.policeforum.org/icat>.
 4. PERF (Police Executive Research Forum), *Vehicular Pursuits: A Guide for Law Enforcement Executives on Managing the Associated Risks* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2023), <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter?item=cops-r1134>.



“You should look at anything related to use of force, de-escalation, and mental health response. Mental health is a large issue in this country, and officers need to know how to deal with it and de-escalate it. We don’t need to be the first ones to respond to that, but our officers need to have a plan in place if they do come across someone who suffers from some type of mental health issue, so we don’t overreact.”

— Michael Cox

“The first policies I looked at in Punta Gorda [Florida] were the high-liability ones. I found that we were still allowing hog-tying and the choke-hold. We had a policy that had something about zero tolerance on all marijuana arrests. Everybody said, ‘We haven’t hog-tied or used a choke-hold in years, so we don’t know why that’s in there.’ But the policy was still allowing it.”

— Pamela Smith

“I changed Fairfax County’s [Virginia] pursuit policy within 60 days of my arrival. It had kind of been lingering. Everyone knew changing it was the right thing to do, but culturally, no one wanted to pull the trigger. I knew I had a small window of opportunity to do it, so I did, and life went on.”

— Kevin Davis

Training

Training is foundational to a police department's work, but many departments do not regularly review and update their curricula to keep up to date with changes in laws, policies, and best practices. A new chief should review the agency's training philosophy and curriculum, as well as relevant state and local training requirements. Early in their tenure, a chief should observe some recruit and in-service training classes in person to understand the training content and delivery style and to ensure that the agency's training supports the chief's vision and meets their expectations. For ideas on ensuring the agency's recruit training is following best practices, new chiefs may want to consult PERF's 2022 report, *Transforming Police Recruit Training: 40 Guiding Principles*.⁵

"I need to know my agency's capacity to handle a number of things. If we had a major demonstration or a riot right now, could my department handle it? Would we know what to do, and are we equipped for it? If there was a long-term critical incident, like a hostage situation, or an active shooter situation, what is my department's capacity to handle it? From there, my concern is getting my department trained and ready to handle these things."

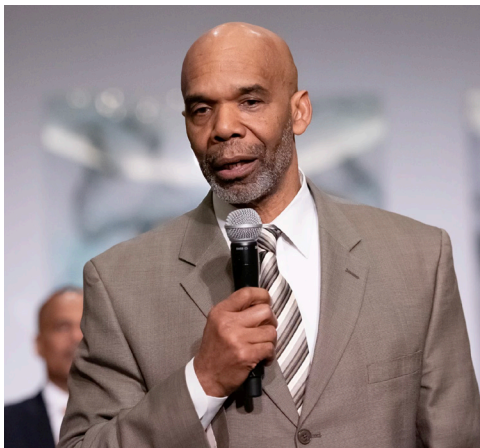
— Michael Harrison

"When I went to D.C., the first thing I saw was that they didn't have the infrastructure to be a good department, meaning the policies and the training. They had policies from the 1960s that were still in effect, and I took over in 1998. Training was an afterthought. We had officers who hadn't been to firearms training in three years, and then we wondered why we had a problem with officer-involved shootings."

"When I took a look at what I really needed to get things on track, it was professional civilian staff. I needed people who could write the policies and training curriculum, do the necessary research and planning, and do the crime analysis."

— Chuck Ramsey

5. PERF (Police Executive Research Forum), *Transforming Police Recruit Training: 40 Guiding Principles* (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2022), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/TransformingRecruitTraining.pdf>.



“I look at what kind of training we have, and whether that training addresses our mission.

Because a lot of times officers are trained on a lot of things that don’t have a direct impact, or even any kind of impact, on the prevention and mitigation of crime. If a department doesn’t have that, it has to be created.”

— Robert White

“When I came into this job in St. Louis and my last job in Wilmington, Delaware, I was coming into different states. So I had to go through their POST training for certification before I put the uniform on.

“That gave me a good perspective on the training, because I had to be part of the training. I had to do firearms training and go to the academy. I got to evaluate the instructors as they were training me to take the test for the state.”

— Robert Tracy

“Externally, you have to consistently engage the community to evaluate your department’s level of public trust and credibility with the goal of building and maintaining strong partnerships.

“Internally, you need to focus on policy, personnel, and process. This includes your training for your frontline employees and supervisors. You also need to pay attention to the way your employees treat each other and the community.”

— Robert Luna

Misconduct complaints

How a police agency handles complaints of misconduct can have a dramatic impact on police-community relationships. Experienced police executives said that a new chief or sheriff should thoroughly review the agency's process for accepting and investigating allegations of misconduct. Chiefs should understand how various types of complaints are handled, and what the investigative process looks like from the perspective of the complainant, the involved officer, and the internal affairs investigator or supervisor. The new chief should also try to gauge how both officers and the community feel about the fairness and integrity of the complaint process.

“You want to look at your pursuit policy, use-of-force policy, and who investigates certain misconduct allegations. When I got to Fairfax County [Virginia], I asked about what internal affairs investigates and what are considered minor misconduct allegations that are investigated at the district level. You might be surprised and need to make adjustments quickly.”

— Kevin Davis

“You have to look at the internal process for handling use-of-force complaints, not just for the community but also for the department members. They should feel like it's a fair process and doesn't drag out. Then discipline should be geared toward changing behavior and getting people in alignment with where you're trying to go.”

— Dave Zibolski

“My first focus was internal affairs. I wanted to have the right person in there, someone of integrity. Because there will be things that preceded you and are going to come down the pike.”

— Kevin Bethel

Investigations

A new chief should review their agency's investigative policies and practices to ensure they are following national standards.

"You have to look at the investigative policies. You want to make sure that detectives aren't conducting their investigations in ways that are unreliable or damaging. I teach eyewitness identification practices, so I take a close look at that. Make sure that search warrants are being approved by management, informants are registered, and money is managed in a responsible way."

— Bill Brooks

"You're going to look at your clearance rate. You're going to look at the training detectives get. One problem we had in D.C. was that new detectives going into, let's say, homicide or violent crimes didn't get basic training on investigations. In Chicago, when you made detective, the first thing they did was send you to detective school where you learned the basic principles and fundamentals of investigation. That was the way you learned the basics of investigation, but in D.C. we weren't providing our detectives with the tools they needed to be successful."

"It's not just how many cases you're closing, it's how you're closing them too. You have to make sure that the cases being closed are being closed properly and people are being treated in a constitutional way. There have been scandals around that sort of thing, and you have to pay attention to what's going on."

"And what about the supervisors? What's their background? I'm not one who believes that you have to have been a detective to be a good supervisor in the detective division, but you need to know the process and what they should be doing. You can't supervise somebody if you don't know what they should be doing."

"I looked closely at the cases that the district attorney or, in D.C., the U.S. attorney didn't charge to find out why, so we could improve. Was it a deficiency in the investigation? Did we leave something out? I may agree or disagree with their decision to charge, but we need to put the best possible case in their hands."

— Chuck Ramsey

Money and property

One area that may be overlooked by new chiefs but which carries enormous liability risk is how the department manages money and property. This area includes both the department's internal resources and the property it collects as part of criminal investigations. A top-to-bottom review of evidence and property management, as well as internal controls over department funds, should be high on the to-do list of a new chief.



“Do an audit of your physical resources. I want an audit of my vehicles, my police stations, and my weapons. I want to make sure every weapon the department owns is accounted for.

“I want an immediate audit of my narcotics and intelligence units. I want to know how they use money to pay informants during undercover operations. Who is in charge of approving cash payments? And do we have cash laying around in district stations or in narcotics or vice units?

“In the first week, I want to announce that I’m doing an audit of all money the department uses, especially petty cash funds and operational funds. Are commanders allowed to spend money and buy things? Who keeps those receipts, and how is it managed? Because you don’t want to get hit with a scandal because you’ve mismanaged money.”

— Michael Harrison

“Make sure search warrants are approved by management, informants are registered, and money is managed in a fiscally responsible way. In the drug enforcement world, you get in trouble by mismanaging drug evidence, money, and informants.”

— Bill Brooks

Previous critical incidents

A new police chief doesn't come into an agency with a blank slate. They inherit a department that is shaped by previous incidents, activities, and perceptions. Police chiefs should study any recent high-profile critical incidents, such as officer-involved shootings, that may affect the way they will be perceived by the department and the community. In some cases, this incident will be what led to the previous chief's departure. Any such incident will probably have been brought up during the hiring process, and the chief should seek out more information from news reports and by speaking with people both inside and outside the department.

"If the department has been amid trauma from some event, then it's important to understand what you're arriving into. A whole swath of the department will feel under siege because there's a spotlight on their actions. And a whole other group of folks in the community may be aggrieved. It's important to understand it, though the best course of action will depend on the scenario. If it's something bad, you must immediately identify the key people on both sides and begin the work of understanding and healing."

— Ramon Batista

"The internet provides a stunning amount of information now for anybody who's taking over an organization or even applying for a job. There's information about the press, citizen expectations, current controversies, and other information that I didn't have when I took my first couple chief jobs."

"It's important to have a sense of the expectations and perceived issues with the police department before you get there. Then test those expectations and assumptions with the people you will be entrusted with leading."

"Political controversies or imperatives that drove the hiring of an external candidate may reflect real issues with the agency that need to be addressed, or they may be political dynamics that have to do with the local political culture surrounding the police department."

— Ed Flynn

Key upcoming decisions

Before arriving and during the first weeks, a chief should ask the hiring authority and contacts in the department what issues are likely to come up during the first few months of the chief's tenure. These might include the following:

- Disciplinary decisions, such as controversial recent uses of force
- Important personnel decisions, such as vacancies that need to be filled
- Expected changes to policy, training, or law
- Other possible challenges, such as high overtime spending or other budgetary matters

The chief should make sure they have information about the time frame in which all these decisions must be made.

“Ask each of the commanders what decisions have to be made in the first month or so, so that there are no surprises for the new chief.”

— **Bob Wasserman**

“Within two weeks, internal affairs is going to come in your door with a thick file saying, ‘Chief, we’ve been waiting for you to get here,’ and plop it on your desk. That’s what the last chief didn’t want to deal with, and they’ve been holding it for you.”

— **Rick Myers**

“You want to immediately know about any high-profile internal affairs investigations or complaints.”

— **Michael Harrison**

Finances and staffing

Police chiefs typically are not budget and finance experts, but they lead organizations that generally account for a sizeable portion of a municipality's budget. While the nitty-gritty of agency accounting can be delegated to finance experts, new chiefs still need to have a broad understanding of the agency's finances, staffing, labor contracts, and the budget process.

Even before they start in the position, new police chiefs should gather as much information as possible about the agency's finances and staffing. Much of this information should be publicly available in budgets and annual reports, and chiefs should ask city and agency staff for more details before starting a position and in their first weeks on the job. They should be on the lookout for potential holes in the agency's budgets, larger trends—such as vacancy rates and overtime spending—that might create budgetary pressures, and opportunities to implement new programs or technology.

“Besides what you can get on the internet, I ask for the policy and procedures manual, the last two or three annual reports, and a copy of the budget.”

“In the budget, I’m looking for how much I have that I can do something with. Salaries can be 90 percent of the budget or more, and those are what they are. So if you’re going to buy patrol cars or implement a new technology, where is that money going to come from?”

— Rick Myers

“Before I get there, I look for budget information, particularly overtime spending. Most standard operating procedures are available online now. You have to understand the labor contracts and different labor organizations, because every city is a bit different.”

“I look at staffing levels and staffing trends. Understand what the academy training looks like, including the pace of classes. Identify any technology issues you’ve walked into. And look at the history of local media coverage of the department.”

— Michael Sullivan

Building Relationships

To be successful, a police chief must build and nurture relationships with a range of constituencies. Given the excitement and expectations that usually accompany a new chief, various individuals and groups are likely to compete for the chief's attention during their first few months on the job. Navigating these competing demands can be tricky.

This publication has already discussed relationships with agency personnel (see page 11). This chapter examines a chief's relationships with other constituencies: the mayor, city manager, other political officials, the community, and the news media.

PERF's Executive Search consultants often point out that a police chief's three primary constituencies are the mayor or city manager, the community, and the police department employees. Experience shows that if a police chief loses the confidence of just one of those constituencies, their job will be substantially more challenging. Losing two of the three constituencies makes their position even more tenuous. (Secondary, but still vitally important, constituencies are the city council, labor unions, and the news media.)

Building relationships checklist

- Begin developing your relationship with your boss—usually, the mayor or city manager—before you take the job. Establish clear lines of communication and boundaries on how much authority and independence you will have.
- Establish relationships with other political leaders, but set ground rules and don't do anything that will interfere with or undermine your relationship with the mayor or city manager.
- Be sensitive to the politics that inevitably impact the department.
- Remain nonpolitical and nonpartisan at all times.
- Rely on experienced, community-oriented personnel to help you identify community leaders and organizations to reach out to and to help make introductions.
- Demonstrate openness and accessibility to the news media by getting out and introducing yourself to the media outlets in the city.

Mayor / city manager

Perhaps a chief's most important relationship is with their hiring authority, generally the mayor or city manager. This is the individual who is responsible for hiring the chief, serves as the chief's boss, and usually has the authority to remove the chief.

These relationships begin during the hiring process. In their interviews, chiefs and hiring authorities should discuss their expectations for each other's roles, how they will communicate, and overall plans and priorities. Chiefs should hold themselves to the commitments they make during the hiring process to build trust with the hiring authority.

“Before you take the job, you have to know if it’s the right fit. You have to have a conversation about how much authority you’re going to have. Are you going to be able to make your own choices for your command staff? Not that you’ll do anything without letting the mayor know, because you never let your boss get blindsided. But you have to have the ability to make those choices. If that mayor isn’t willing to give you that kind of authority and autonomy, maybe that job isn’t for you.”

“Having said that, that doesn’t mean you say no to everything. You have to pick your battles, because the mayor is your boss. There may be requests that you agree to because they don’t cross any major line you have. But you need to establish those lines early on.”

“I had regular weekly one-on-one meetings with the mayors in D.C. and Philadelphia. Sometimes the deputy mayor would be there, and sometimes I’d bring my first deputy with me.”

“I’d feel the need to talk to the mayor about anything I thought was newsworthy, where a reporter might stick a microphone in front of their face and ask them about it. You develop an instinct about what to share, because you don’t want to burden them with everything.”

“If there’s a good event or some positive news, give the mayor a call. If you’re doing a press conference, see if the mayor wants to be there, so the people can see the mayor is on top of things.”

— Chuck Ramsey

“After my appointment was announced but before I was sworn in, I spent a week in Knoxville and, most importantly, spent a lot of time with the mayor. That was valuable for many reasons, but primarily because it allowed me to quickly meet a lot of people and get to know her really well.”

“During that same period, I also got to meet a lot of people in Knoxville who would be critical to my success, including city councilmembers, neighborhood leaders, and officers at their roll calls. I proactively reached out to every member of our city council to facilitate one-on-one meetings. Because of that legwork on the front end, I went straight to work on my first day as the chief and didn’t have to spend as much of that time meeting people.”

— Paul Noel

“I think it’s really important to maintain a strong, open line of communication. In Boston and Seattle, I spoke to my mayor every day, and we often debated and had spirited discussions behind the scenes. But when I spoke publicly about the city and the police department, I was very respectful and never betrayed my boss.”

— Kathy O’Toole

“If you are chosen as the top pick, whether you’re internal or external, you need to sit down and make sure that the expectations are clear before you’re hired for that position. Because you lose a lot of leverage after that mayor or city manager becomes your boss. You have to iron those things out. That can be a hard conversation, because you might think you’re going to risk losing that position. But if you don’t initially set expectations respectfully and professionally, it’s a tougher conversation to have after that person’s your boss.”

— Robert Tracy

“It’s important to keep those lines of communication open, and you have to be an active participant. If it seems as though you’re not having much communication, you need to do what you can to make that happen again. There’s just too much room for misinterpretation if you don’t have a direct line of communication.”

— Michael Cox



I’ve worked for a city manager and a couple mayors. The city manager can be a buffer between elected officials and the department. When you’re reporting directly to the mayor, there’s always a political element to it.”

— Dave Zibolski

“Be aligned with your city’s leadership, so you don’t put them in an awkward position. Police departments often don’t have enough staffing, and sometimes it’s because cities don’t have the budget for more staffing. So you don’t want to put your mayor or city manager in a spot where they have to justify making other needed improvements in the city instead of dealing with public safety.”

— Ramon Batista

Other political officials

Depending on the structure of the local government, chiefs will probably interact with local political officials other than the mayor or city manager, such as city councilmembers. Councilmembers often represent distinct geographic areas, and when serious crimes or events occur within their districts or wards, the councilmembers usually expect a direct pipeline to the chief. Chiefs also need to recognize that councilmembers will likely vote on the police budget and other measures that affect the department, so having a good relationship with members of the council is important.

These relationships can be delicate, however, because some councilmembers may have differing perspectives from the mayor or city manager or they may be political rivals of the mayor. Some local leaders may expect to have input on personnel and other decisions. A chief needs to develop relationships with those councilmembers while remaining loyal to their mayor or city manager and true to their own values. At all times, it is imperative that the chief be non-political and non-partisan. One of the quickest ways for a chief to lose the confidence and support of both officers and the community is to come across as political or partisan.

Chiefs in cities that are also state capitals may face the unique challenge of being expected to develop relationships with state legislators as well. They may be called upon to testify before legislative committees and to speak on legislative issues.

“There’s a much greater expectation for political involvement here in Minneapolis compared to Newark. The city council is full-time, with a dedicated staff, and the politics are highly ideological. It’s also a much more engaged community.”

“People here expect you to be politically involved. I’ve been to the State Capitol in St. Paul several times to discuss bills with legislators—something I never did in New Jersey, nor did I know anyone who did. The level of political involvement here is entirely different.”

— Brian O’Hara

“I have a government affairs liaison to handle everything with City Hall, councilmembers, and state or federal elected officials. She accompanies my personnel to meetings, so if a captain meets with a councilmember in their area, she is there at the table. She worked as a staff member for state officials on the East Coast, then worked for the mayor’s office here. She has relationships with all the city staff members. So she was a perfect candidate for this role.”

“We’ve never had anybody who understands how to navigate City Hall or can translate ‘political speak.’ Our mayor and city councilmembers are all from the same political party, but they don’t always have the same priorities or agree on the same issues. So she helps us navigate that.”

— Scott Wahl

“When you get there, establish who your direct report is and how you will communicate with other officials. Tell the others that there will be things you can’t tell them, and they’ll have to live with that. And don’t tell them that during a crisis; tell them beforehand. As long as you establish the ground rules early on, when you’re not in a crisis, you’ll be fine.”

— Bill Brooks

“Understand the way the city government and management works. That includes the role of the mayor and the role of city councilmembers in the political environment.”

— Ana Lalley



“You have to make it known who you are and what you stand for. And not just to your appointing authority—likely the mayor or city manager—but also to other elected officials, like councilmembers. Make it known that you’re going to lead the agency with a high level of integrity. Your appointing authority is one stakeholder with one set of views and expectations, but there are other stakeholders—community members, elected officials, faith-based leaders—and it’s politics.”

“I created a selection system for hiring and promotion, so there’s an open competition for assignments and promotions. There’s a process with vetting material and a scoring matrix, and it’s handled by a diverse committee of people. Once that’s in place, you can remove yourself from that process, so the mayor or councilmembers cannot put you in the position where they can tell you who to promote or select for an assignment.”

“It can be easier for a new chief to navigate politics if they create an environment where they aren’t unilaterally making decisions.”

— Michael Harrison

“I’ve only worked in cities with strong city managers, not one with a strong mayor. I think it’s been beneficial for me to go to my city manager and ask what kind of conversations they are comfortable with me having with the city council. Then you follow their lead. Because they’ll recognize that it’s important for you to build a relationship with city council based on trust, but they also will want to know what’s going on so they aren’t blindsided by councilmembers.”

“Remember that councilmembers are political, and your conversations have to be transparent. So if you’re saying something that you wouldn’t want printed in the paper the next day, then you shouldn’t be having that conversation with them.”

— Ramon Batista

“You’ll be in a city that has a wide spectrum of talent, energy, sincerity of purpose, and intellect on the bodies that vote on everything that affects you. This has been a struggle for me for many years, because my default is to overwhelm people with information and convince them of the rectitude of my case. No matter how many times that hasn’t worked, that’s still my default position.”

“I learned to have a chief of staff with terrific political skills and have them be the day-to-day manager of city council relations. It took me a while to figure that out, but when I got there, my life got so much better. Find the right skill set to balance your technical expertise, because we function in such a political environment.”

— Ed Flynn

Community stakeholders

A particularly challenging set of relationships for a new chief to navigate is with the community. Especially in large cities, the sheer number of community and interest groups makes it difficult for a new chief to know whom to reach out to and to find the time to meet with them. At the same time, community leaders are usually eager to meet the new chief and begin advocating for their interests. If the chief is brand new to the jurisdiction, managing community relationships can be particularly challenging in the first few months.

To assist with identifying key community members and organizations, and reaching out to begin building relationships, new chiefs should rely on experienced personnel—both inside and outside the department—who know the community well. Staff assigned to community policing, public information and affairs, and patrol operations, as well as community outreach staff in the mayor or city manager’s office, may be helpful resources. In addition to identifying leaders and organizations, these individuals can assist with briefing the chief and making introductions. In developing relationships with the community, new chiefs should work to connect with both formal organizations and informal leaders. Potential community partners include faith-based organizations, schools, business associations, advocacy groups, nonprofits, and neighborhood associations.

“Particularly if you’re an outside chief, you need to identify the stakeholders, advocates, elected officials, and the faith community leaders. Get someone trusted who knows who in the community needs to be contacted right away, within the first 30 days. Sometimes it’s just a phone call or getting on someone’s schedule for a meeting three months out, but at least you’ve acknowledged him or her.”

“Now, you’re going to miss somebody. Down the road, someone will say, ‘You never reached out to me.’ That’s always disappointing, because I really try hard to identify and meet with everyone. To try to avoid that, I have a primary person identify those ‘power players’ for me, then I bring that list to someone other than that primary person and ask who is missing.”

— Kevin Davis



“I knew I had to get community involvement, so I created a citizen advisory council and a business advisory council. I found out who the people were who wanted to bring the community and police together, and I put them on the councils.”

— Pamela Smith

“I’ve seen chiefs not get out in the community enough, or all their communication with the community is defensive. They attend community meetings to talk about a shooting or a scandal in the department, so every time they’re talking with the community, they’re on the defensive.”

“Doing an hour of foot patrol every single day has worked really well for me. Everybody knows me. More than once I’ve had people pull over to the side of the road to tell me about problems in their neighborhood.”

“You’ve got to get out and meet the public. And I don’t just mean the politicians or people in administrative positions. You’ve got to meet the common people—merchants, kids, parents—to have conversations with them and be available.”

— Bill Brooks

“I always give out my phone number, including to media and advocates. I had to change my number once because an advocate shared it across the country around my confirmation hearing in Baltimore. But I still err on the side of giving out my number, even if it could blow up on me.”

— Kevin Davis

News media

Managing relations with the news media can be a challenge for new chiefs, particularly for those who have not previously held a position that involved regular interaction with reporters. For those chiefs, some basic training in media relations may be advisable.

New chiefs should consult with city and agency media relations personnel to understand the local media landscape and to ensure that the department’s and the city’s media relations strategies are in sync. New chiefs should make the rounds with local media outlets to introduce themselves. (Alternatively, the chief might invite media representatives to police headquarters for a meet-and-greet.) These early interactions provide an opportunity for the chief to meet reporters in a relaxed, nonconfrontational setting, to discuss their vision for the department, and to set expectations for how the police-media relationship might work. New chiefs need to realize that working with the local news media will be a constant, so starting out the relationship on the right foot is extremely beneficial.



“The biggest thing with me is to be as transparent as you can be without compromising an investigation. And be truthful, because nothing is more important than your own integrity. Once you lose that, forget about it.

“The media has a job to do, and I respect that job. A lot of times I don’t like what they say or do, but as long as they’ve done some research, it is what it is. I don’t take it personally.

“You have to be accessible to the media. I’d go out to every station and introduce myself.

“You learn how to talk in sound bites. When you’re talking, you know you’ll be reduced to five or ten seconds on the air, so say things as succinctly as possible for the sound bite that they’ll use.

“Let the people in your organization talk to the media as well. It’s not a one-person show. You have talent in the organization, and you don’t always have to be the face. And I don’t just mean the PIO [public information officer]. After a homicide investigation, let your investigator talk about it. If there’s a sexual assault, let someone from your special victims unit talk about it. If it’s about community policing, let the district commander or a lieutenant or sergeant do it. Let the public know that the people in your organization are on the ball.”

— Chuck Ramsey

The news media are out to do a job. If you’re a new chief, you’re the new shiny object. They’re looking for sound bites, so give them good sound bites. Make sure that you’re measured. Be prepared for wild card questions, maybe about a current event. Manage expectations and don’t over-promise, although you should be confident that what you do works.

“In both St. Louis and Wilmington, Delaware, I was the first outside chief in the departments’ over-200-year history. I think the press wanted things to happen immediately and to see me make immediate changes. I had to say, ‘No, we’re going to get to where we need to be, but this is a process. I have to work on things internally that we’re not going to be talking about externally to make sure we have success in the future.’”

— Robert Tracy

“Depending on the editorial position of the news media, you can anticipate that you’ll initially get positive coverage, and you have to use that to your advantage. Meet with editorial boards and do interviews with the local newscasts. Explain how your experience comports with the challenges you’re facing there. And demonstrate that you’re impressed with the talent pool inside the organization and their commitment to change and desire to serve.”

— Ed Flynn



“You don’t want to come in and start setting a new narrative that’s different from the city’s narrative. You want to be on the same page. So you should probably have multiple conversations about what the city is trying to do and make sure you are in line with that.”

— Michael Cox

“Understand that people, and especially the media, will try to make you think they’re your buddy so you let your guard down and give more information. I think a lot of chiefs think they’re the smartest person in the room, and therefore they can say this or that and come across as decisive and in control. But there’s nothing wrong with diplomacy. There’s nothing wrong with keeping your guard up a little bit at times.

“The public and the media appreciate somebody who cares that what they’re saying is accurate and who doesn’t play games. They appreciate when you give a little bit of context. ‘I know you’re interested in this. I know the public is interested in this. But I just can’t tell you, and here’s why I can’t tell you.’”

— Tom Manger

Implementing Change

Once a new chief or sheriff has assessed the issues facing the agency and started building relationships inside and outside the department, they need to begin implementing change. Chiefs interviewed for this project said that the best approach to implementing change will always be situation dependent. But they made some general recommendations about setting priorities and balancing time demands when beginning to lead an agency through a period of change.

Implementing change checklist

- Any changes needed to address officer safety or other critical needs, such as liability issues, should be made immediately.
- For other changes, it is usually beneficial to take time to gather feedback and build support.
- Don't get consumed with the day-to-day crises that are inevitable. Carve out time to develop some type of strategic plan that spells out your priorities for moving the department forward.
- The strategic plan should include a communications strategy for how your vision and priorities will be shared within the department and to the community in an authentic and credible manner.
- Your time is precious—and much sought after—during the first six months. Be intentional about how you schedule your time, and find the right balance between internal and external demands.

Transition period

New police chiefs and sheriffs must strike a difficult balance when making change. If made too quickly, a change may be poorly received or fall flat. Waiting too long may make it harder to implement meaningful change when the chief is no longer in their “honeymoon period.”

Chiefs said that some changes should be made immediately, such as those that address officer safety issues. But other changes, such as an overhaul of the promotional process, should be made after gathering employee feedback and building support.

“Go slow with the change you have to make. It’s a weird dichotomy because in the first three to six months, you have the greatest opportunity to make changes because you’re new. But at the same time, if you’re the person who comes in and flips things around in the first six months without taking the time to understand what’s going on, you’re going to really upset people. So you have to understand the department and know what it needs before you start making changes.”

— Ramon Batista

“You see things and you think, ‘Wow, we need to change this. And we need to fix it now because it’s a liability or safety issue.’

“And you explain why it needs to be changed, why it’s a liability, why it’s a safety issue, why it’s not best practice, or why it’s not the culture we’re seeking.

“Everyone looks at you and thinks, ‘You just walked in. This is what we’ve always done, and we’ve been told forever that we do a really good job. So you must be full of it and are just trying to impose your will.’

“I keep trying to tell myself to slow down, but sometimes there are things we need to address right away.”

— Dave Zibolski



“Because I had been [at the Philadelphia Police Department] before, at the beginning I was moving a little bit too fast. I run hard and fast, and they weren’t ready for that. Within six months, I had about 360 action items they had to do. Coming back in, I made some assumptions that I could pick up where I left off and maybe came in too fast. I can say that I want to do all these things, but I have to have the team in place with the ability to execute.”

— **Kevin Bethel**



“I was promoted from a commander in my department, so I knew what was going on at the command level. I didn’t have to walk into the department and figure out what was going on. So I was willing to quickly make change and do something different. But you have to be willing to take the scrutiny, and endure people thinking, ‘What are we doing here?’, for the betterment and future of the department and the community you serve”

— **Ana Lalley**

“I knew what was not working well here in San Diego because I came up through the organization. Becoming chief was always my dream and goal, and what I’ve been gearing toward for most of my career. I never knew if I would be in a position to become the chief, but when I applied, I already had a plan. I knew I wanted to completely restructure the organization.

“When I was a finalist and met with the mayor, I told him there were significant things I wanted to do, I didn’t want the job if he wasn’t going to support those changes. He agreed and said, ‘It’s your department, run it as you see fit.’

“But I didn’t know how to change an organizational chart for a government agency; it’s like bending rebar. I knew the city’s CFO [chief financial officer]. I had about 60 days between being announced and being sworn in, and I used that time to meet with people at City Hall who could help me put my plan together. I worked with our personnel department, which handles classified employees, and our city’s HR department, which handles unclassified employees. The city’s COO [chief operating officer] told me, ‘You can change anything you want, but you’re not getting any new positions.’ So I had to work within those confines.

“I balanced the division of labor between the assistant chiefs. I brought back a commander rank. And I wanted to bring about a more fiscally minded approach to running this organization. We have 2,500 employees, both sworn and professional staff. Our budget is \$673 million. So we’re a large business. And many of our challenges and issues occur because, like other police departments, we don’t know how to run an organization. We’re good cops, and we know how to address crime. We know how to talk to people in the community. But we really need the management principles to help us run the business.”

— Scott Wahl

Setting priorities

After assessing an agency's issues, a new chief or sheriff needs to begin setting their priorities. Chiefs will probably have identified more issues than they have the capacity to deal with right away, so it's important to prioritize based on the department's needs and the chief's capacity to implement change in the short term.

The chiefs interviewed for this project had different ideas about what exactly a strategic plan might look like, but they agreed that a new chief should develop some sort of plan.

"After I met with command staff and community folks, I started thinking about a strategic plan. As police chief, you seem to move from one crisis to another. If you don't have a strategic plan with the goals you're working toward, you get caught up in the day-to-day stuff and don't have the opportunity to move the department forward."

"But a plan is only as good as its implementation. And in order to implement, you have to have a good communication strategy, so people know what you expect of them and what you want them to do."

"In both D.C. and Philadelphia, I called together all personnel, sworn and professional staff, and made a presentation around the strategic plan. I told them what I had seen during my first four or five months there. I told them my observations on the department and its needs and priorities. Then I told them what I planned to do. And I answered questions, because people have a right to ask questions."

— Chuck Ramsey

“We live in a society that moves very quickly. People talk about three- and five-year strategic plans, but the world’s going to be a different place in five years.

“I like to call my plans ‘action plans’ instead of ‘strategic plans.’ They lay out the pillars that are really important to me—themes like multi-disciplinary approaches to community safety, innovative technology, crime reduction, and officer wellness.

“That’s worked really well for me, because there’s always a crisis on the horizon in policing. You must be able to manage crises effectively, but you can’t operate in reactive mode 100 percent of the time. For instance, strategies that focus on prevention and intervention inevitably produce positive dividends.

“You must have a consistent message, which I learned from Bill Bratton. I liken it to an ‘elevator pitch,’ and it should be aspirational. I remember Bill would make comments about the things we were going to accomplish, and I would think, ‘How the heck are we going to do that?’ But it always seemed to be a self-fulfilling prophesy. If you establish your vision, communicate it effectively, and are determined, you can accomplish it as long as you stay focused.”

— Kathy O’Toole

“I’m going to embark on a five-year strategic plan, which is something we’ve never done. I hired someone from the outside—who just completed a five-year strategic plan for the school district—to serve as executive director of my strategic planning work. When I was at the school district as chief of school safety, we went through a process to develop a strategic plan, and I thought, ‘The police department has never done that.’ I recognized that was a gap, and we needed to set objectives outside of the crime issues.

“We also need project managers. We do these projects, but who are the managers? We’ve trained our folks to be the responders, but not to set a timeline and project plan with objectives.”

— Kevin Bethel

“In assessing what you have and what you need, you want to know the state of crime in the city, the previous crime strategy, if there was one, and your crime strategy.”

“In the first 90 or 100 days, bring your appointing or hiring authority your comprehensive strategic plan for the department, which will include your strategy for dealing with crime.”

— **Michael Harrison**

“You’re not going to lay out a vision on day one. If you walk in with a plan, that’s not a good thing. You assess, understand what the community wants, and understand what you believe the city needs. Then you bring your expertise to that. But don’t be too fast to come in with a vision.”

— **Michael Sullivan**

“Three months into my tenure, we had a mass shooting in our downtown entertainment area. Three months into the job, you’re still very new and trying to figure out where everybody is. But you always need to be ready for something like that.”

“We had been working on a violent crime and gun violence reduction strategy prior to that, and that gave me a platform to push it forward. Every crisis has an opportunity, and that was where I first recognized that.”

— **Kathy Lester**



Communicating change

It's not enough for a new police chief or sheriff to have a plan for implementing change. They also need a plan for communicating the changes they envision, so that both the department and the community understand what to expect. This communications plan should be coordinated with the hiring authority, but chiefs should maintain control over their own communications to ensure their message is shared effectively and comes across as genuine.

Police chiefs should approach their communications with both confidence and humility. Arrogance will come across poorly and may hinder the chief's efforts to accomplish their goals. And chiefs should be very careful with their words, because an offhand remark can be misconstrued and magnified, leading to internal and external pushback and unnecessarily derailing implementation efforts.

"If I was becoming a chief again, I'd hire someone who specializes in communicating about change. Sometimes you're not the best person to communicate the changes you're going to make, because you'll get pushback. That's true especially if you're an outsider."

"I would also find a trustworthy, well-respected person of rank in the agency to bring in close to my leadership team and almost make them the voice and face of change. While I'm still the leader, I'd find someone with immediate credibility with the rest of the agency, and have that person work with me to deliver the message about what will happen in the future. Because if they believe that person, you'll get less pushback."

— **Michael Harrison**

"If I were starting again, I would make sure I communicated with the executive leadership a little more at the beginning to make sure everybody understands where I'm going. I did an executive retreat the first month I came in to walk through my vision of the department. It was four hours. I walked through the mayor's executive orders that we had to address. I made sure they understood my vision of crime fighting. It wasn't a heavy conversation; it was more of an introduction to do some level-setting with everybody."

— **Kevin Bethel**

“I remember as a young officer, we had a mayor tell us our culture was broken. When you say that, you’re telling a cop who’s doing a lot of work that they’re broken. So I’m careful about saying ‘culture change.’ I talk about ‘reform’ a lot and the ‘evolution’ of our profession. But I try to stay away from talking about ‘culture.’ Because when you talk about the culture needing to change, people take that as there being something wrong with them personally.”

— Michael Sullivan

Balancing time demands

New police chiefs and sheriffs should expect to be extraordinarily busy during their first six months on the job (and beyond). Chiefs we interviewed stressed that there is no way to avoid the hectic pace, because it takes a lot of time to meet politicians and community members, build relationships with employees, and understand the issues facing the agency. Some chiefs suggested splitting time roughly equally between the community and the employees, while others said they emphasize developing relationships within their organizations during the first six months. But they all said that a new chief should make the most of their time by scheduling engagements thoughtfully and purposefully.

“You have to write down a plan for what you’re going to try to accomplish and who you’re going to meet in your first six months as a police chief, then you have to follow that plan. Maybe you’ll have plans for the first three months and the first six months, and that’s okay. Remember that it’s insanely busy for those six months, so craft a plan and a timeline for how you’re reaching everyone and doing everything you plan to do.”

— Ramon Batista

“I would say spend equal time with the community and your officers, especially if you’re entering an organization when there is a significant incident going on. People want to see the chief and hear from the chief, and they want to talk. It’s important to have these relationships with officers, and they want to hear from you.”

— Ana Lalley

“Whether it’s community meetings or roll calls with the cops, you have to be out there as much as you possibly can. You have to do both. A lot of community organizations are going to want to meet with you, and you’re going to be going to roll calls to talk to your own folks. You’re going to be very busy, and one’s not any more important than the other, in my opinion.”

— Chuck Ramsey

“The first six months are just really busy. You’re working a lot of 14- to 16-hour days, and that’s exactly what you have to do. There are meetings with department heads, city officials, and community players. Then I did one-on-ones with the whole department with 220 personnel, which took me a little over a year. I met everyone on their shift, so I was scheduling that and my daytime hours and responsibilities didn’t change.”

— Dave Zibolski

“When you do community meetings, make sure they’re helping your reform agenda that first year, and aren’t just opportunities for someone to demonstrate their importance by getting the new chief at their meeting. Otherwise, you will never sleep.

“It’s one thing to go to the Rotary Club meeting; it’s another to go to five meetings every night. When are you going to talk to the cops? When are you going to sleep? You have to pace your energy level as you’re introducing yourself to the community.”

— Ed Flynn

“In the first three to six months, you’ll spend considerable time fine-tuning your action plan and establishing your team. You must be certain you identify effective managers who can run most aspects of the operation on a day-to-day basis. You don’t want to get embarrassed by a budget shortfall or a management deficiency. In retrospect, once I had a solid management team in place, I only spent maybe 10 to 15 percent of my time in the office.

“I tried to spend most of my time outside of headquarters, at meetings or in the field, engaging constructively with community members and cops on the front lines. After all, they best know the challenges they face and often suggest the most sensible solutions to those challenges.”

— Kathy O’Toole



“You have to be intentional with your calendar. Your calendar says a lot about your priorities. We all get stuck in a daily grind, when you go from hour to hour to hour throughout the day, and you might be doing the wrong things. So your executive assistant or scheduler has to be like-minded with you regarding who gets your time.”

— Kevin Davis

“During my first month, my focus was internal, on the organization. I went to community meetings in the evening, but I devoted those early days almost exclusively to building internal relations and learning about the inner workings of the Knoxville Police Department. I met with every lieutenant and above individually, met with sergeants in small groups, and attended roll calls. I also made a point of walking around the building to meet officers and staff in their natural habitat. I think that internal-first focus bought me a lot of credibility within the organization.”

— Paul Noel

“In all three agencies where I was ‘the outsider,’ shortly after my arrival I made it clear to employees and the community that for the first three to six months I was going to focus my efforts internally. I was going to get to know my employees and let them get to know me. I was still going to every community event with the mayor or city manager to build relationships with the community, but my focus was on doing ride-alongs with the officers, visiting every shift briefing, visiting every unit and division, and doing one-on-one interviews. Earning the trust of your employees is imperative. I think this approach paid dividends for me, especially in the short term. Setting that expectation up front has always proven to be beneficial.”

— Steve Mylett

Interim Positions

Chiefs who are appointed on an interim basis while the jurisdiction searches for a permanent leader face a different dynamic from other new chiefs, and they will need to approach their interim assignments differently than they would a permanent position. Each situation is different, but the mayor or city manager is generally looking for an interim chief to provide stable leadership that keeps the department moving forward as they recruit and hire a permanent chief. Often, the interim chief is hired following a critical incident or controversy that prompted the previous chief to leave.

Interim chiefs should get clear expectations from their mayor or city manager about what the chief's role will be. Are they simply a caretaker, or do they have the authority to recommend and implement changes? While an interim chief should address any immediate concerns or liabilities affecting officer or community safety, they should get guidance about making major organizational changes or beginning any sort of long-term change process that they may not be around to see to completion. In some instances, serving as an interim chief may serve as a try-out for the permanent position (if the chief is interested).

PERF spoke with Rick Myers, who has held interim chief positions in Sanford, Florida, and Commerce City and Manitou Springs, Colorado, about his experience serving in that role: "I think the plan is different for interim jobs than regular appointments. You're usually there for a much shorter period of time. You're not there to build long-term relationships. You have to try to fix things for the next chief. That might mean stepping on the toes of a councilmember or a beloved member of the department, and I might take a different approach to those situations if I was going to have to live with their long-term impacts."

PERF also spoke with Robert White, who served as an interim chief in Asheville, North Carolina, about his approach to the position: "The first thing you need to do is understand what the mayor or city manager is asking you to do. Some people go in wanting the job permanent-

ly. Then there are individuals like me. I had no desire for the permanent job, but I knew there were some changes that needed to be made. I knew that based on my early observations and based on the mandate from the city manager. You have to understand what the person hiring you wants.”

Moving from a Larger Agency to a Smaller Agency

Police officials often move from a command position in a larger agency to the head of a smaller agency when taking their first chief’s job. To learn more about that change, PERF spoke with Pamela Smith, who began her career with the Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Police Department, where she rose to be the acting chief, then served as the director of the Baltimore Police Department’s training academy, and is now the police chief in Punta Gorda, Florida: “We have 60 employees, so I know every single person in the organization.

“You have to manage your expectations. Let’s say you have a traffic problem and you need to address it. You may be used to having a traffic unit you can stick on that problem, but now you don’t have that. So you have to learn how to manage your resources and address issues in creative ways.

“You have to keep that line between being a supervisor and being a friend, and that can be harder in a smaller agency.



“You can’t move people around as much. For example, I have four patrol lieutenants and three lieutenants overseeing other areas. So if one lieutenant isn’t working out, I don’t have a lot of places to move them or other people to move in. You really have to learn to develop your supervisors.”

Managing the Personal Changes

Many of the chiefs and sheriffs we interviewed discussed the challenges they faced in their personal lives upon becoming a chief. An outside chief is not only taking on a new job but also moving to a new home in a new city. If they have school-age children, it means finding the right schools for them. Their spouses or partners may have to find new jobs. Seemingly small matters such as finding doctors or getting a driver's license and vehicle registration all take time. And just getting settled into a new community can be challenging, especially when people learn that your spouse and children are related to the new chief. Chiefs said these changes can be difficult on their families.

“Make sure your family is on board before you decide to make such a major move. Make sure your wife or husband and kids know that there’s going to be a lot of sacrifice that will impact the entire family. If you’re doing things correctly by investing your time establishing yourself in the new agency and community, you’re going to be away from the house a lot. Now, that absence from your family is not sustainable over a long period of time, and you need to be mindful of your family’s needs as you onboard into your new role. Balancing all of this can be difficult, which is why it is important to have conversations with your family in advance of making such a major move.”

— Steve Mylett

“We talk about work-life balance with our personnel, but most of us are terrible at it. I’m terrible at it.

“I’ve been married to my wife for 37 years, and she has gone with me into new communities. It’s difficult for her. She’s reticent to ingratiate herself with a lot of people, because people will hear her last name and ask if she’s related to the chief. She doesn’t know if they’ll consider that a good or bad thing. So I think that’s hard for her.

“Your family often gets the short end of the stick, and that can be difficult. I’ve been lucky that my wife has been on board, but it’s tough and it doesn’t work that well for everybody.

“And you’re never off. When I take vacation, I still get emails and texts. It just doesn’t stop. If you don’t look at your phone while you’re on vacation, you’re buried when you get back.”

— Dave Zibolski

Managing personal changes checklist

- Be up front with your spouse or partner and children about the challenges and sacrifices they may have to make in moving to a new community, and make sure they are on board.
- Give yourself ample time before starting your new job to focus on the details involved in moving (e.g., finding a home, enrolling children in school).
- Quickly develop your senior staff who can manage the department while you’re devoting time to your family and the transition.
- Expect to be a “celebrity” in your new community and be prepared for the constant attention and scrutiny that come with it.
- Steel yourself for the nastiness and vitriol that you may engender, especially if you are implementing changes that people are uncomfortable with.

Settling into a new city

Some chiefs discussed the challenge of finding housing and settling into their new hometown while simultaneously starting a fast-paced, high-visibility new job. They recommended taking time to settle in before beginning the new role, if possible.

“Make sure you give yourself enough time when you’re leaving one organization and going to the next. There are logistical things you have to think about. Where are you going to live? There are things you need to make sure are in place, because once you’re in the job you hit the ground running at 1,000 miles per hour, and you don’t have any time for yourself.”

— Michael Sullivan



“Your first year in your new role will be extremely busy. I would highly recommend taking some personal time off in between each role if you can.

You’ll need time to get your personal life together and get settled as best as possible. It’s the personal side that people forget about. Aside from everything needed to settle into your new place to live, you’ll need to do things like find doctors, get your driver’s license, vehicle registration, etc.”

— Danielle Outlaw

“The first weeks and months as a new chief are intensely stressful. It’s crucial to be intentional about reducing any additional personal stress—particularly when it comes to securing housing. Finding a place to live can be especially difficult when you’re still learning about the community. If you’re relocating to a new city, invest time early on to understand the local housing market, partner with a trusted realtor, and finalize your living arrangements before your official start date.”

— Paul Noel

Personal and professional relationship changes

Several chiefs and sheriffs said their positions changed their relationships with their colleagues and the public in ways that affected them personally.



“When I campaigned for sheriff of Los Angeles County, I had to adjust to being publicly attacked by other law enforcement officials.

I had not been programmed to speak negatively about other law enforcement officials, specifically those in leadership positions.

Once elected, I had to adjust from interacting with one mayor and councilmember as a chief to interacting with 42 mayors and several hundred councilmembers, representing 42 contract cities for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department.”

— Robert Luna

“Sometimes you have to make tough decisions that affect people you love and care about. That part is tough. Some of those decisions are about accountability, but some are also about team fit.”

— Scott Wahl

“Being a second-in-command is not the same as being the chief, and nobody can really understand what being the chief is until you’re sitting in that seat. You’re responsible for all things, and there’s an immense amount of stress that comes with it.

“You always have a failsafe as a deputy chief. Even if you don’t feel safe in that position, you always have a chief to go to. As a chief, you don’t really have anybody who has a higher level of expertise about policing or navigating challenges in your city because every city is unique. You are who is ultimately responsible for the success or failure of your department.”

— Kathy Lester

“As a new chief, you don’t know everything. It’s okay to have a group of mentors to lean on, who will listen and be a sounding board. It’s a sign of strength to reach out to the men and women who have done the job before you and tap into their experience.”

— Robert Tracy

“[Former Commissioner Charles] Ramsey would always say, ‘It’s going to be different when you sit in the chair.’ He was right. As much as you prepare and as much as you think you’re ready, it’s different when you ‘sit in the chair.’ The final decision rests with you. Before, I might have gone up the chain and Ramsey would fire someone. Today, I fire them. I’m making decisions that impact everybody in this department. Every policy has my name on it. They’re all mine now.”

— Kevin Bethel

“Being a police chief comes with a certain level of celebrity and scrutiny, whether or not you ask for it. Be intentional in your words and mindful of how you carry yourself on and off duty. Don’t let arrogance get you fired.”

— Danielle Outlaw

“I was hired to make changes and we are doing a lot of things that are completely new to our agency. We’re modernizing this police department with the vision of becoming the national model for mid-sized police agencies. We have tried to get a lot done quickly while being thoughtful about our priorities and intentional about the pace of change.

“There have been challenges throughout that process, both internally and externally. You have to be prepared for criticism and armor yourself for that. In my case, it was invaluable to have mentors and a strong support network to lean on.”

— Paul Noel

Rookie Mistakes

Anyone starting a new job is likely to make mistakes at first. For most positions, these “rookie mistakes” are likely to go unnoticed by anyone outside the immediate workplace, and they are unlikely to have lasting consequences for the employee or their organization.

Not so with police chiefs and sheriffs. They are some of the most recognized and closely scrutinized public officials in a community, and their words and actions carry enormous weight. This is especially true for new chiefs coming from the outside. People inside the agency and in the community will be closely watching the new chief for any missteps, and they may be quick to amplify and criticize any rookie mistakes.

PERF asked each chief and sheriff interviewed for this project to identify some of the rookie mistakes that they made or had seen others make when first starting out as a chief. The following is a selection of their responses:

“Identify quick wins and address low-hanging fruit to establish some good favor. That being said, if you come in as an outsider and immediately change uniforms, or patches, or other things that institutionally belong to the organization without input or some form of a process, just know that folks are going to have a problem with that.”

— Danielle Outlaw

“A rookie mistake is to change the nomenclature of units within the police department. A new chief, particularly an outside chief, should adapt to the department’s culture, because who cares what you call a unit. You have to get used to it.”

— Kevin Davis

“In Washington, D.C., there would often be a special badge for certain events, like the presidential inauguration or 9/11. They were numbered, and the tendency to distribute them by rank, expecting the chief to be given badge #1, is a huge mistake. Distribute them by time on the job, so specialty badge #1 goes to the longest-tenured person on the department. Never eat before the troops are fed.”

— Terry Gainer



“In Greensboro, I went into the department and had conversations with the community and the officers. After long conversations and copious notes, I thought I was giving them a compliment by telling them that if I had to rate them, I’d say they were a ‘B’ department. That was a mistake on my part, because they thought they were an ‘A’ or ‘A+’ department. I had to figure out how to get back on track with the department, and that was a mistake.”

— Robert White

“Going back to 1980, when I was appointed executive superintendent in Boston, I underestimated the sense of hostility the rest of the leadership team had toward me. I was this brash, young 32-year-old. Most of them were in their 50s, and several felt they should have had that job. I tried to do too much too fast without getting them to common ground. My mistake was not recognizing that I didn’t have a team.”

— Bill Bratton

“I think it’s easy to underestimate how disruptive your presence is to the organization and political culture, even if everybody’s being nice to you. This town just made a major commitment to bring in somebody from outside their world, presumably to fix the most important civic function. There are a lot of expectations about what you’re going to be like as a leader. Then, of course, once change starts happening, someone is discombobulated by that change. And, after six months or a year, resistance may gradually develop to the alien presence in the ranks.”

— Ed Flynn

“Be very careful—even leery or fearful—of an attempt to change badges, uniforms, or the markings and color schemes of patrol cars soon after your arrival. It’s a trap. The culture of the department may need updating, but tread slowly on branding changes.”

— Terry Gainer

“When I went to Ann Arbor, the pace of things was different. In Boston, you ask someone to do something and you expect them to do it immediately. In Ann Arbor, they would get to it at some point. And it was not disrespectful; it was just the pace of that environment. It can lead to misunderstandings, which lead to more misunderstandings, which lead to people perceiving each other in totally different ways.”

— Michael Cox

“Personnel in the agency you lead believe in their mission and are proud of the profession. Notwithstanding any circumstances that may have led to a change in leadership and your appointment, do not underestimate their personal and professional pride. Losing their respect and confidence in your ability to lead will not be quickly overcome.”

— Terry Gainer

“I think I created some mountains I didn’t need to climb, when I could’ve taken a step back and explained my actions. There’s a time to say, ‘We’re going this way. Either get on the bus or I’m going to run you over.’ But there’s also a time to be less confrontational and form better partnerships with elected officials, instead of cutting my nose off to spite my face.”

— Mike Chitwood

“Sometimes you hear another chief make comments about something and think, ‘Maybe temper that a little bit.’ It is important to take a step back and not be so confrontational about things. They know you’re the chief; you don’t have to make that known. The art of negotiation and compromise is truly how things are accomplished. There is no room for an ego as a police chief, and things are not personal.”

— Ana Lalley

“I’ve seen newly appointed chiefs try to say yes to everything and everybody. They try to curry favor at the expense of their responsibilities as chief. Making promises can be easy and tempting to do, but delivering on those promises can be difficult at times. And if you don’t deliver on what you said you were going to do, it erodes your credibility. My advice to a newly appointed chief is to do a lot of listening when you arrive and get to know the new environment. Take time to gather information before you commit to making significant changes to the organization.”

— Steve Mylett



“When things go wrong internally, you have to have a consistent response. You can’t let your personal feelings interfere with your professional judgment, and you can’t react emotionally. Whether it’s some officer who’s still in the academy or a sergeant with 30 years on, you have to have a consistent response.”

— Tom Manger

“Don’t assume your cultural approach is the right one. Cultures have existed and evolved in different sets of circumstances. Don’t assume all traditions are right, but don’t immediately reject them. Figure out ways to adapt them to you and you to them.”

— Ed Flynn

Top 10 Rookie Mistakes for a New Chief to Avoid

In their first few months on the job, many chiefs and sheriffs will face challenges or crises whose origins were beyond their control—a natural disaster in their community, a national controversy that leads to widespread demonstrations locally, a major change in state or federal law. Chiefs will be judged on how well they respond to these situations, but they can hardly be blamed for creating them.

There are, however, instances where the actions of the new chief may create unnecessary controversy. These unforced errors, especially in the first few months on the job, can set the new chief back and undermine trust with their bosses, their department, and the community.

This chapter relates some of the “rookie mistakes” made by the police executives interviewed for this publication. Here, we present the types of mistakes PERF has witnessed over the years in our work with police departments and new chiefs.

10. Surprise your spouse or partner with the good news that you have accepted a new job and will be moving in two weeks—without consulting them first.

9. In your first all-staff communication, announce that you have unilaterally decided to change the badge and uniform patch that have been beloved for decades to a style similar to the one worn in your previous agency.

8. In the first week on the job, without input from other department leaders or members, release a list of 10 “major reforms” that need to be made in the next 60 days.

7. Against the recommendation of your IT department, insist that the agency migrate from Android to Apple devices because you are more comfortable using an iPhone.

6. Whenever you are asked why something isn't working in the agency, blame your predecessor.
5. Make a big deal about attending your first roll call and promise to make it a weekly occurrence, only to never show up at another roll call again.
4. Arrive an hour late to a meeting of citywide community organizations that your office organized to "get to know the community."
3. When you show up on the scene of an officer-involved shooting and members of the news media corner you, respond with "No comment." Continue stonewalling the media for the next week.
2. State unequivocally that you are excited about moving to your new city—but still go back to your previous home every weekend and fail to update your voting or tax records.
1. In the ride from the airport to the mayor's office for your swearing in, confide to the student intern driver that you think the mayor is a bit of a publicity hound, only to discover that the intern is the mayor's niece.

Conclusion

Successfully navigating the first six months can be the first step to a rewarding career as chief.

Among all positions in local government, the job of police chief or sheriff is undoubtedly among the most highly scrutinized, stressful, and fraught with potential pitfalls. The process of selecting a new chief or electing a new sheriff is itself a high-profile undertaking that draws considerable public interest. And by the time a new chief is selected and takes office, community expectations are high and tolerance for early missteps—“rookie mistakes”—can be low.

There are similar feelings, perhaps even skepticism, among the employees of the agency the new chief is about to lead: Who is this person, and what makes them any better than the last chief? This dynamic may be especially strong in jurisdictions that have chosen a new chief from outside the agency to address a crisis or the perceived shortcomings of their predecessor.

It is this combination of internal and external scrutiny, outsized expectations, and high stakes that makes the first six months of a new chief’s tenure so crucial. Many other officials, including elected leaders such as mayors, often enjoy a “honeymoon period” in which the public is willing to reserve judgment for a time as the officials settle into their new roles. Police chiefs and sheriffs seldom enjoy that luxury. When it comes to public safety, the community and the agency expect a seamless transition with few, if any, bumps in the road.

Navigating those first few months in a new job, often in a new city and with a new and unknown supporting cast, can be tricky. This is especially true for people who are starting their first job as a chief. There are myriad decisions to be made regarding person-

nel and policies. There are relationships to be built, both inside and outside the agency. And there are changes to be implemented with care and precision. Plus, new chiefs are typically undergoing major changes in their personal lives. These need attention as well.

As challenging as this situation is, the good news is that there are experienced police executives who have been down this path before. This book captures the experiences and insights of 29 chiefs and sheriffs who have been the “new chief” many times over. They have served in cities of different sizes and with vastly different communities, crime problems, and challenges. In this book, these leaders offer sound, practical advice to new chiefs and would-be chiefs on what challenges to expect and what factors to consider as they go about shaping their new agencies.

As importantly, these chiefs and sheriffs offer hope and inspiration to those law enforcement leaders who have just become a chief or who aspire to be one someday. The leaders interviewed for this book would be the first to say that, while the job of chief or sheriff is extremely challenging and even infuriating at times, it is still one of the most fulfilling jobs there is.

Preparing and supporting the police chiefs of the future has been a priority of PERF for many years. The first edition of our book, *Command Performance: A Career Guide for Police Executives*, was published in 1999, and the second edition was released in 2015.⁶ *Command Performance* provides detailed information on the police chief selection process and how would-be chiefs can successfully navigate it. This new publication presents the logical next steps in the process of becoming a chief: Once they have secured the position, what should chiefs be thinking about and doing in the critical first few months on the job? And for chiefs nearing the end of their careers, PERF has a publication called *Chapter 2: How Police Chiefs and Sheriffs Are Finding Meaning and Purpose in the Next*

6. Charlotte Lansinger, *Command Performance: A Career Guide for Police Executives* (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2015), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/CommandPerformance.pdf>.

*Stage of their Careers.*⁷ Similar to this book, *Chapter 2* draws on the experiences and insights of leaders who have left the policing profession and moved on to new endeavors.

Together, these three publications provide essential guidance to the heroic men and women who are ready to take on the demands of becoming a police chief or sheriff in today's complex world. Policing has never been more challenging than it is today, and leadership has never been more necessary. We hope this book helps tomorrow's chiefs learn from the experiences of their predecessors and excel in what will be the toughest, yet most rewarding, assignment of their careers.

7. PERF (Police Executive Research Forum), *Chapter 2: How Police Chiefs and Sheriffs Are Finding Meaning and Purpose in the Next Stage of Their Careers* (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2019), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/Chapter2.pdf>.

Appendix. Checklist for New Police Chiefs

Personnel

- Get to know current command staff members *before* you start; ask for resumes and written answers to open-ended questions about the department and their roles.
- Identify a trusted department insider you can rely on to help you get up to speed. This individual might be an executive assistant or chief of staff.
- Conduct a thorough assessment before making command staff and other leadership changes. While the window of opportunity to assemble your team won't last forever, don't feel rushed to make personnel changes you may regret later.
- During the hiring process, discuss with the hiring authority the possibility of hiring outside personnel to assist you.
- Review sworn and professional staffing throughout the agency to ensure that all members are being given opportunities for promotions and specialized assignments.
- Introduce yourself through an initial message sharing your values, experience, and goals. Follow that up with as many face-to-face discussions as possible.
- Especially in smaller agencies, make a concerted effort to get to know your employees—their names, families, interests—to the extent possible.
- Understand the role police unions play in your jurisdiction, and begin developing a working relationship with union leaders.

Key Issues Facing the Agency

- Begin researching key issues facing the agency well before your first day on the job.
- Compare agency policies with national best practices to identify weaknesses and vulnerabilities.
- When assessing key issues, chiefs promoted from within the agency may want to bring in an outside entity to provide a fresh perspective.
- Make use-of-force and vehicle pursuit policies a top priority for immediate review.
- Conduct a thorough review of recruit and in-service training, including by attending some classes.
- Review the misconduct complaint process to ensure it is viewed as fair by both officers and the community.
- Conduct a top-to-bottom review of the evidence and property function and internal controls over department resources.
- Develop a list of key decisions that will need to be made in the short term.
- Get an overview of the agency's finances, staffing, and the budgetary process.

Building Relationships

- Begin developing your relationship with your boss—usually, the mayor or city manager—before you take the job. Establish clear lines of communication and boundaries on how much authority and independence you will have.
- Establish relationships with other political leaders, but set ground rules and don't do anything that will interfere with or undermine your relationship with the mayor or city manager.
- Be sensitive to the politics that inevitably impact the department.
- Remain nonpolitical and nonpartisan at all times.
- Rely on experienced, community-oriented personnel to help you identify community leaders and organizations to reach out to and to help make introductions.
- Demonstrate openness and accessibility to the news media by getting out and introducing yourself to the media outlets in the city.

Implementing Change

- Any changes needed to address officer safety or other critical needs, such as liability issues, should be made immediately.
- For other changes, it is usually beneficial to take time to gather feedback and build support.
- Don't get consumed with the day-to-day crises that are inevitable. Carve out time to develop some type of strategic plan that spells out your priorities for moving the department forward.
- The strategic plan should include a communications strategy for how your vision and priorities will be shared within the department and to the community in an authentic and credible manner.
- Your time is precious—and much sought after—during the first six months. Be intentional about how you schedule your time, and find the right balance between internal and external demands.

Managing the Personal Changes

- Be up front with your spouse or partner and children about the challenges and sacrifices they may have to make in moving to a new community, and make sure they are on board.
- Give yourself ample time before starting your new job to focus on the details involved in moving (e.g., finding a home, enrolling children in school).
- Quickly develop your senior staff who can manage the department while you're devoting time to your family and the transition.
- Expect to be a “celebrity” in your new community and be prepared for the constant attention and scrutiny that come with it.
- Steel yourself for the nastiness and vitriol that you may engender, especially if you are implementing changes that people are uncomfortable with.



The Police Executive Research Forum

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) is an independent research organization that focuses on critical issues in policing. Since its founding in 1976, PERF has identified best practices on fundamental issues such as reducing police use of force; developing community policing and problem-oriented policing; using technologies to deliver police services to the community; and developing and assessing crime reduction strategies. Over the past decade, PERF has led efforts to reduce police use of force through its Guiding Principles on Use of Force⁸ and Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) training program.⁹

PERF strives to advance professionalism in policing and to improve the delivery of police services through the exercise of strong national leadership; public debate of police and criminal justice issues; and research and policy development. The nature of PERF's work can be seen in the reports PERF has published over

8. PERF, *Guiding Principles on Use of Force*, Critical Issues in Policing (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2016), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/guidingprinciples1.pdf>.

9. PERF, "ICAT: Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics," accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.policeforum.org/icat>.

the years. Most of these reports are available without charge online.¹⁰ All the titles in the Critical Issues in Policing series can be found at the end of this report and on the PERF website.¹¹ Recent reports include *Managing Officer-Involved Critical Incidents: Guidelines to Achieve Consistency, Transparency, and Fairness*,¹² *The Carjacking Crisis: Identifying Causes and Response Strategies*,¹³ and *Embracing Civilianization: Integrating Professional Staff to Advance Modern Policing*.¹⁴

In addition to conducting research and publishing reports on our findings, PERF conducts management studies of individual law enforcement agencies; educates hundreds of police officials each year in the Senior Management Institute for Police,¹⁵ a three-week executive development program; and provides executive search services to governments looking to conduct national searches for their next police chief.

All PERF's work benefits from its status as a membership organization of police officials, who share information and open their agencies to research and study. PERF members also include academics, federal government leaders, and others with an interest in policing and criminal justice.

All PERF members must have a four-year college degree and subscribe to a set of founding principles, emphasizing the importance of research and public debate in policing, adherence to the Constitution and the highest standards of ethics and integrity, and accountability to the communities that police agencies serve.

10. PERF, "PERF Reports," accessed February 13, 2025, <http://www.policeforum.org/free-onlinedocuments>.
11. PERF, "Critical Issues in Policing Series," accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.policeforum.org/critical-issues-series>.
12. PERF, *Managing Officer-Involved Critical Incidents*, Critical Issues in Policing (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2025), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/ManagingOICIs.pdf>.
13. PERF, *The Carjacking Crisis*, Critical Issues in Policing (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2024), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/Carjacking.pdf>.
14. PERF, *Embracing Civilianization*, Critical Issues in Policing (Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum, 2024), <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/Civilianization.pdf>.
15. "Senior Management Institute for Police," Police Executive Research Forum, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.policeforum.org/snip>.



The Motorola Solutions Foundation

As the charitable and philanthropic arm of Motorola Solutions, the Motorola Solutions Foundation partners with organizations around the world to create safer cities and thriving communities. We focus on giving back through strategic grants, employee volunteerism, and other community investment initiatives. Our strategic grants program supports organizations that offer first responder programming and technology and engineering education, and align to our values of accountability, innovation, impact, and inclusion.

For more information on the Foundation, visit
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- *The Carjacking Crisis: Identifying Causes and Response Strategies*
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