



Fire and Police Commission

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Memorandum

To: Leon W. Todd, Executive Director

From: Barbara Cooley, Research and Policy Analyst

Date: October 31, 2023

RE: The Police Sergeant Promotional Process

This memo is a response to Board concerns about the effectiveness of the MPD promotional process at advancing the highest quality leaders, especially to first-line commander positions such as sergeants. It contains a listing of best practices in protective services promotion, followed by a review of MPD's current promotional practices, with recommendations.

A publication of the Police Executive Research Forum, "[Promoting Excellence in First-Line Supervision: New Approaches to Selection, Training, and Leadership Development](#)," a conference of fifty police chiefs and sheriffs around the country, provides an excellent overview of the topic, including many examples of practices already in use. It discusses the importance of sergeants in their organizations, especially in shaping the culture of the organization and in managing the use of force, as they are the first-line supervisors of an average of 85% of agency line personnel. Sergeants also train and mentor officers and administer new policies. Good sergeants can help a police department retain its patrol officers. Selecting sergeants today requires an emphasis on leadership, rather than merely on technical knowledge.

BEST PRACTICES IN POLICE PROMOTION

The full promotional process has three phases: 1) meeting initial eligibility requirements, 2) testing for the promotion; and 3) training and observation after the promotion.

Phase I: Meeting Eligibility Requirements

- While **length of service** requirements for promotion vary among police departments, promotion to the sergeant level typically follows an average of at least 5 years of officer experience. Enough time is needed for practical on-the-job learning but not so much as to leave officers feeling "stuck" and becoming discouraged.

- “The process of **career development** involves three activities: training designed to develop job-related SKAS [Skills, Knowledge, and Abilities], self-improvement through higher education and job growth through assignments to progressively more responsible and demanding positions within the agency.” (IACP National Law Enforcement Policy Center, “[Career Development](#)”)
- Some departments require completion of a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice or a related field in addition to work experience for promotion. Others give preference points to those who have pursued **advanced education** related to policing and leadership. Often, tuition for such preparation is reimbursed.
- Much has been written recently about **emotional maturity** as a positive characteristic for police leadership. Police Chief Magazine, a publication of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), contains many articles about emotional intelligence (EI) as it relates to policing. One, titled [Emotional Intelligence in Policing](#), defines EI as including “*personal competencies* like self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-control, and *social competencies* like conflict management, empathy, and leadership. Both competencies are necessary in policing.” [emphasis added]
- **Mindfulness training**, recommended for all officers on the street including potential sergeants, may help combat compassion fatigue as well as trauma and stress disorders. There is at least one course designed specifically for officers, the [Peace Officer Wellness, Empathy & Resilience \(POWER\) Training Program](#), from the Center for Council in partnership with the US Department of Justice COPS (Community Oriented Policing Solutions) Office.
- A **mentoring** program helps with career development for officers who are interested in pursuing advancement. An article by Barry A. Reynolds, MSM, “[Succession Planning: 5 Keys to Developing Future Police Leaders](#),” stresses the importance of mentoring:
 - “A mentoring program offers the opportunity for individualized and specific training and counseling by matching the most qualified and prepared candidates with current leaders who share their knowledge and experiences.
 - “Mentoring programs should clearly outline the duties and responsibilities of both the mentors and their protégés, and should focus on advanced skills development and career advancement strategies. For those candidates that aren’t quite ready to assume the mantle of leadership, it’s time to identify current strengths and deficiencies, and put the focus back on their development. While these members might not be quite ready for mentoring, they are still vital to the long-range goals of the plan as they will be the next wave of rising stars ready to step up and ensure that your succession plan ends in success.”
- **Work history** is also often considered, including past disciplines and commendations. For sergeants to better supervise patrol officers, patrol experience, not merely office experience, is helpful. Clear and consistent guidelines are needed for considering past disciplines; i.e., how few should they be, how recent must they be, how severe should the

discipline be, and whether there has been any repeat of the same offense.

- **Removing barriers** to promotion can help ensure that potential good leaders are not discouraged from applying. For example, those with parental responsibilities, often women, may need shift accommodations.

Phase II: Testing for the Promotion

- **Eligibility requirements and deadlines** for testing should be effectively disseminated so that all those of any ethnicity or gender who qualify and have interest in advancement will be made aware of them and encouraged to apply. This is critical for achieving and maintaining diversity in the force.
- Exams should be offered on a reasonably **frequent basis**.
- **Preparatory materials** should be made available early enough before the testing for candidates to have enough time to study them thoroughly.
- In addition to written tests, **oral boards** are needed to assess management skills and leadership potential. Some agencies are using an assessment center, a group of individual and group exercises to evaluate leadership, communication, interpersonal, management and analytical skills.
- The **testing content** should cover not only rote memorization of standard operating procedures and personnel rules but also critical thinking and decision-making skills. It should be designed to determine leadership values and approaches. Ideally, questions which can assess emotional intelligence/maturity and interpersonal skills would be included. These last can help engender trust and loyalty in officers, essential during and after stressful situations. They can also “help strengthen bonds and build trust within communities.”¹

Phase III: Post-Promotion

- Some **training** should take place before on-the-street duty begins, after which training should continue.
- **Scenario-based training**, emphasizing high-risk situations such as use of force encounters, is recommended.
- There should be a **probationary** period after promotion, during which sergeants are evaluated on leadership traits and skill sets as well as technical correctness.
- **Frequent feedback** is helpful for new sergeants. The Tucson Police Department requires new sergeants to keep a journal, which becomes part of their evaluation. Their

¹ Walden University, [“Understanding the Benefits of Emotional Intelligence in Law Enforcement.”](#)

new sergeants are evaluated on 12 core competencies during their one-year probationary period²:

- • Communication and responsiveness
 - • Community engagement
 - • Crime reduction/mitigation
 - • Incident command
 - • Job knowledge
 - • Leadership
 - • Management/direction
 - • Organizational commitment
 - • Problem solving
 - • Self-awareness
 - • Supervision
 - • Transitioning from officer to supervisor
- Further **career advancement assistance** helps prepare sergeants to become future department leaders. Clearwater, Florida has a Career Pathing and Preparedness Program, for instance.
 - Keeping **the number of officers** a sergeant must supervise down (six per sergeant was considered ideal by members at the Police Executive Research Forum conference referenced above) allows the sergeant to spend more time supporting them in the field instead of doing paperwork, ensuring that policies and procedures are correctly followed, especially in critical incidents. This not only allows sergeants to be more effective but also aids in retaining sergeants.

CURRENT MPD PRACTICES IN SERGEANT PROMOTIONS

MPD Phase I: Meeting Eligibility Requirements

- At least 7 years of police officer experience is required for promotion to sergeant. Three years of experience is required for promotion to detective. During the three or seven years immediately preceding the written test for these promotions, applicants can have had no more than 4 cumulative days of suspension for disciplinary reasons
- Advanced study in law enforcement or special courses in leadership are not required. However, if outside courses are pursued the department reimburses tuition.
- The Chief can object to a candidate on an eligible list, including promotional eligible lists, based on work history. If there is a chief objection, the FPC Board then interviews the candidate and determines whether the candidate will remain on the eligible list.
- No promotion from an eligible list is effective until approved by a majority of the FPC Board at a regular meeting.

² Police Executive Research Forum, October 2018, "Promoting Excellence in First-Line Supervision: New Approaches to Selection, Training, and Leadership Development," Critical Issues in Policing, Washington, DC

MPD Phase II: Testing for the Promotion

- Detective and police lieutenant promotional exams are currently in process. The sergeant exam will be offered in early 2024. Going forward, it is our goal to offer police promotional exams every 2 years.
- Upcoming exams are announced at roll calls. Officers are also notified by email, and flyers are posted with the information. Bulletins for the [detective](#) and [lieutenant](#) positions can be seen on the City website.
- Preparatory materials are made available to candidates after they have signed up to take the exam. There is both a written and an oral component to the exam.
- This analyst reviewed the detective and lieutenant written exam booklets from the October 2023 exams. Both written exams concentrated primarily on knowledge of rules and procedures. The written exam for detective contained some questions, particularly in the sections on community policing and code of conduct, that referenced cooperation and leadership. The written exam for lieutenant placed more emphasis on these qualities. It is necessary to pass the written test in order to proceed through the testing process.
- The oral portion of the exam takes place with a series of interview panels – an assessment center. All panels consist of internal and external assessors trained by the vendor, typically two external and one internal rater, at the candidate’s current level or one step above. Included may be a subordinate role-playing exercise involving a rule violation with an individual on the panel playing the role of the subordinate who violated the rule, and/or role playing at being in control of a crime scene.
- Finally, a career review board receives a copy of the candidate’s resume, called their “fact sheet” and written by the candidate. The candidate then orally presents their career history to the review board. The candidate can choose what to present from their work history; negatives such as infractions or disciplines are unlikely to be mentioned.
- The weight given to each step in the process is:
 - Written test 25%
 - Assessment center 35%
 - Career review 35%
 - Seniority 5%

MPD Phase III: Post-Promotion

- Training after promotion to sergeant consists of 3 weeks of classroom training and 3 weeks rotating.
- New sergeants serve a probationary period of one year.

ANALYSIS

MPD Phase I: Meeting Eligibility Requirements

Waiting 7 years before applying for promotion to sergeant may cause potential future leaders to become discouraged and lose motivation. It can negatively affect retention of those who wish to lead. Five years of experience (which is the norm) may be adequate to learn rules and procedures.

Presumably, the length of service is intended to ensure maturity before promotion. A more effective way to develop and assess maturity in officers could be to require training in leadership and mindfulness, as described above, or alternatively to give additional credit to candidates who have sought out such training.

MFD requires extensive training before candidates can be tested for promotion to Fire Officers I and II, in the form of a Professional Development Program (PDP) course of study which is administered by the Wisconsin Fire Service Education Office of the Wisconsin Technical College System at MFD expense. An online LACK (Leadership, Accountability, Culture, Knowledge) course is among the requirements. MFD's training for Fire Officers I and II follows the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) requirements. Those include "knowledge of characteristics of leadership," and "the signs and symptoms of member-related problems (such as behavioral health issues), causes of stress in emergency services personnel, adverse effects of stress on the performance of emergency service personnel, and awareness of AHJ [Authority Having Jurisdiction] member assistance policies and procedures."³

Another recommended practice is to identify officers who have interest in advancement and provide them with a trained mentor who is already at the level they would be applying for. Mentoring could include, among other things, allowing the candidate to shadow on calls. To avoid bias and/or favoritism, potential leaders must be able to self-select for mentorship opportunities.

Promotional process transparency and clarity is critical to avoid misconceptions by and discouragement of potential candidates for promotion. A report of approximately ten pages in length is provided to each candidate after the process explaining their results.

The Chief has discretionary powers to recommend an officer not be promoted based on prior work history. The FPC Board also has the authority to deny promotions based on prior work history. Other than the minimum eligibility requirements, these are the only times in the process when a history of rule infractions and disciplines are considered. Taking prior discipline into consideration is a sensitive matter. It can be argued that the officer has "paid the price" with policy review and/or suspension for the infraction and it should not have further impacts. Requiring leadership training and mentoring for promotional candidates may be a more reliable way to help such officers better understand and change their behavior in the future.

³ NFPA, 1021 Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications, 2020

MPD Phase II: Testing for the Promotion

It is difficult to test for emotional intelligence/maturity. Positive results on a related preparatory course could provide a meaningful assessment of a candidate's emotional and leadership ability and might be credited accordingly. Questions addressing interpersonal behavior and leadership were recently added to the community policing and code of conduct sections of MPD's written promotional exams. The oral exam already included role playing exercises. It may be possible also to include questions or exercises which directly address recognizing and handling emotions.

Crediting compassion and maturity in rating a candidate may also benefit women officers, who tend to be "named in fewer complaints and lawsuits, make fewer discretionary arrests and are perceived by the public to be more honest and compassionate."⁴ Such a step might enhance MPD's efforts to meet the requirements of the 30x30 pledge, which calls for the department's sworn members to be 30% female by 2030.

MPD Phase III: Post-Promotion

MPD's training period appears to be in line with accepted best practices. Ideally, the probationary period should also include continued mentoring and frequent feedback on core competencies.

Today, retention of new sergeants is critical, especially considering the investment of resources in both time and funds that has been made in them. Career advancement assistance should continue, so that they do not come to feel they are at a dead end.

MPD does have enough sergeants to keep the number of patrol officers for whom each sergeant is responsible down to about six (approximately 200 sergeants for 1200 police officers), so that the sergeant can spend more time in the field than behind a desk doing paperwork.

⁴ ["30x30: Advancing Women in Policing,"](#)