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MBTA police leader aims to mend fences as Concord's chief

By Jennifer Fenn Lefferts | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 06, 2014



JOHN M. GUILFOIL/CONCORD POLICE

Concord's new police chief, Joseph O'Connor, stressed that the department needs "to move forward."

When Joseph O’Connor, a longtime veteran of the MBTA transit police, saw the job opening for the chief of police in Concord, he knew it was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up.

O’Conner, 49, started his law enforcement career working for two other town departments in Massachusetts before moving on to the MBTA. Twenty-four years later, after working his way up to superintendent-in-chief, he’s ready to go full circle and return to a community department.

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He thinks Concord is the perfect fit.

“I wanted to move back into municipal policy, and this was a unique opportunity to come to a town well-situated economically, that has all these historical sites and is well run,” O’Connor said. “It’s close to home and the police department has had a good reputation for being forward-thinking.”

The Arlington resident started his new job as chief June 2, and is excited about the next chapter in his career.

As a part of that, O’Connor said, he will be spending time listening to the needs of the residents, increasing communication through social media, building upon successful community policing programs such as Restorative Justice, and repairing frayed relationships with some members of the police union.

“The challenge is building trust and realizing there is some history, but it’s a new day and we can only look to the future,” O’Connor said.

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“I by no means discount their feelings, but in order to be successful, we need to continue to build that trust and we have to move forward.”

Officer Chuck Dirienzo, a former president of the Concord Police Association, said tensions were high between the union and Chief Barry Neal before Neal resigned last fall. Neal, a former lieutenant in the department, was named chief in 2010. He could not be reached for comment.

Dirienzo, who has an arbitration case pending against the department, said several grievances were filed during Neal's tenure over what he called unfair treatment of officers. In Dirienzo's case, he is disputing what he says was an unfair reprimand by Neal.

Dirienzo said he's hoping for change under O'Connor.

"He seems down to earth, and I haven't heard one bad thing about the guy. He comes across like a cop's cop — someone you want to go on a call with," Dirienzo said.

"Being a little jaded, I'm waiting to see. But I'm always hoping for the best."

After Neal resigned last fall, the town named William Chase interim chief. Town Manager Chris Whelan said he thinks Chase brought some stability and hopes the union can move forward with O'Connor.

"We did go through a rash of grievances and complaints that were filed, but I think Chief Chase addressed many of those, and Joe O'Connor is committed to an open-door policy," Whelan said. "He's also very direct. I think conversations are happening, and we're optimistic any problems will get ironed out."

Whelan said that shortly after Neal was hired in 2010, the new chief announced that he only planned to stay on for about three years. In the spring of 2013, Whelan said, Neal asked to stay on for another year, but he later changed his mind.

"In the spring he acknowledged there was some turmoil in the department and suggested he stay a year to get it worked out, but in the fall he announced he wasn't having success getting it resolved, and submitted his resignation effective immediately," Whelan said.

Chase was hired to fill in while the town conducted the search that led to O'Connor.

O'Connor had served with the MBTA Transit Police since 1990, and previously was an officer in Dennis and Winchester.

He rose through the ranks of the Transit Police from patrolman to superintendent-in-chief, a position he held since 2012.

He has a bachelor's degree from Curry College and a master's from Boston University, both in criminal justice. He is also a 2010 graduate of the FBI National Academy

O'Connor said he's been impressed by the Concord officers and department staff.

He said he's getting out and meeting residents and business owners, and is going through department records to see where resources are needed.

As with many other communities, he said, there are quality of life issues that need constant attention, such as traffic congestion and house break-ins.

He said his goals are to deliver an exceptional service to the town all the time, be seen as a model for community policing, and keep residents informed.

"I'm very impressed with the quality of the staff here, and even though they've had some challenges, working together, we're going to do some excellent things," O'Connor said. "I'm confident we'll be a model police agency in the area."

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