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WHAT SHOULD IT TAKE TO BE HIRED?

Loose hiring standards and City Hall interference produce inferior recruits

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Pity poor Chicago PD Chief [Jody Weis](#). Hired seven months ago to take control of a department beset by allegations of corruption and brutality, the former head of the FBI's Philadelphia office vastly expanded the unit that investigates officer misconduct. Weis now faces a work slowdown by officers who complain that his penchant for severe discipline makes them reluctant to be proactive lest their actions draw citizen complaints.

Weis doesn't even have the final word on discipline. As we reported [last week](#), that's the responsibility of an external citizens' board, which regularly turns down the Chief's attempts to fire misbehaving officers. In one noteworthy example they refused to terminate a cop who had been convicted of misdemeanor assault for beating up a handcuffed citizen. (Weis then had the officer charged with Federal civil rights violations, enraging officers who said their colleague had been punished enough.)

What about hiring? Weis doesn't have the final word there, either. That's the province of the "[Human Resources Board](#)," comprised of three citizens appointed by the Mayor. Although board members admit that nothing requires them to consider appeals by rejected applicants, they've done so by the hundreds, reversing nearly forty percent of the department's decisions. Those who got a break include gang associates, drug users, spouse beaters and general-purpose thugs. Chicago's infamous aldermen even got the board to OK a (supposedly, former) drug dealer. Many reinstated applicants had been turned away elsewhere, threatening to make Chicago PD a dumping ground for rejects.

As Los Angeles City council member (and former LAPD Chief) [Bernard Parks](#) can attest, Weis' travails are not unique. Stern, humorless and prone to impose heavy-handed discipline, Parks constantly butted heads with the union and the rank and file. Like in Chicago, crime rose while arrests and field interviews declined. Then [Rampart](#) broke, and nothing's been the same since.

Rampart came to light because an officer got caught stealing cocaine. Otherwise it was mostly about police using evil means to go after bad guys. Officers lied, planted evidence and brutalized suspects to get them to talk. LAPD's final report describes the pre-employment records of four of these cops:

Officer 1. “Sold marijuana to two other students on one occasion while he was in high school. At age 15, the police detained him for investigation of tampering with vehicles on a car sales lot....the Police Department recommended his disqualification, but it was overturned by the Personnel Department.”

Officer 2. “...had been arrested as an adult for grand theft. The incident occurred when he struck a public bus driver during a dispute over a transfer. When the driver's watch fell to the ground, the officer picked it up and began walking away, which resulted in his arrest. The Department did not recommend his disqualification.”

Officer 3. “...admitted losing his temper during arguments with his wife and pushing her on six different occasions. He was psychologically eliminated due to "temperament/impulse control. However, he was eventually cleared for hiring by the Personnel Department psychologist.”

Officer 4. “...had been arrested three times before he became an officer at the age of 24. As a juvenile, he was arrested for stealing hubcaps. As an adult, he was arrested and convicted of driving under the influence (DUI). One year before his hire, he was cited for having an open container of an alcoholic beverage in his car and was arrested for driving on a suspended license (suspended from the earlier DUI) for which he was sentenced to ten days in jail. In the military, he was disciplined for disobeying a lawful order. His background investigation disclosed that he ‘loses his cool very easily’ over minor incidents, and acted like a ‘big macho man.’ The psychological examiner advised the Personnel Department that there was not enough negative information to warrant his disqualification.”

Here is what the report said about the decisions to hire these four:

“While it is impossible to substantiate completely, it appears that the application of our hiring standards was compromised when these officers were hired during periods of accelerated hiring in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This is not to say that anyone intended to do so. But, one need only look at the pre-employment histories of these four people to see that something was seriously wrong when they were approved for hire. We must recognize that [erosion of standards] has occurred and commit ourselves to never sacrificing quality for the expediency of numbers.”

[Parks](#) didn't get a second term. In 2002 he was replaced by Bill Bratton, a New York transplant made famous by his much-ballyhooed *Compstat*. Two years later,

facing an officer shortage, Bratton quietly relaxed hiring standards, taking on cops with [credit issues](#) and other “gigs” that would have disqualified them in earlier days. Applicants could even admit that they experimented with [cocaine](#). It took the City Council two years to find out. Irate to have been left out of the loop, three council members, Parks, Dennis Zine (a reserve officer and former Sergeant), and Greig Smith, another reservist, bitterly criticized the Chief for lowering the standards.

What was “Hollywood Bill’s” reaction? He shrugged it off, claiming that it’s never been tougher to get hired on. After all, every applicant now has to take a polygraph! What he didn’t say (maybe because he didn’t know) was that the [National Academy of Sciences](#) found polygraphs unreliable for screening employees.

Loosening rules has been tried elsewhere, with predictable consequences. Burned by poorly-educated applicants and lax hiring practices, the [Washington D.C Metropolitan Police](#) now require either 60 college credits, three years military service or five years prior police experience. According to a [spokesperson](#), “it does make recruiting harder [but] in the long run, it’s supposed to make for a better officer and a better department.” [Chicago PD](#) also requires two years of college or a combination of college and military. Meanwhile the famous [LAPD](#) doesn’t even ask for a high school diploma: all that’s necessary is either a GED or passing the California High School Proficiency Examination, which any reasonably bright 16-year old can do. How might this affect the agency’s ability to field a literate, analytically-skilled workforce? Gee, let’s think...

Hiring cops is a complicated issue and we don’t propose to have all the answers. Let’s give L.A. City council member [Dennis Zine](#), a career LAPD officer, the last word:

“I understand that the pool of people who want to be police officers is limited, but if you look at the history of the department, and the scandals we have had, we don’t want to add to that problem.”

Enough said.