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Boston Police Department Ranks May Have Diversified, But Promotion Eludes Many Cops Of Color



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Police departments nationwide, facing additional scrutiny these days, in light of recent fatal shootings both by and of police. How does Boston stack up?

Boston is a majority minority city, and the top command of the Boston Police Department reflects that. It is more diverse than it's ever been. But that command staff is a tiny fraction of the overall department, fewer than 20 in a department that numbers over 2,000. And those high-level command positions? They're appointed. For mid-level promotions, it's all about the civil service exam— and that exam leaves hundreds of minority officers stuck on the at the bottom of the career ladder.

Boston Police Detective Larry Ellison is President of the Massachusetts Association of Minority Law Enforcement Officers. He says the numbers tell all:

“In the position of captains, I believe there are 24, 26...and there are only three people of color. In the lieutenants it's even worse. There's maybe three or four out of maybe 150. The

sergeants, it's over 200. I think we have maybe 17 or 18 sergeants of color. So, the numbers are really bad.”

“I wish I could do more at the sergeant, lieutenants and captains level, but that’s strictly governed by civil service,” says Boston Police Commissioner William Evans. “There’s a promotional civil service exam, that people have to sit down and learn the laws and the criminal procedure, and that’s been the practice forever.”

But not everyone agrees with the promotional exam.

“The experts say that’s not a good way to pick candidates for promotion,” says Harold Lichten. Lichten is a lawyer representing minority police officers. He says the exam appears objective, but it does not focus on the actual demands of the job.

“It may seem fair, but it actually doesn’t pick good superior officers because the skills needed to be a good superior officer are command presence, judgement, ability to deal with lower level personnel, ability to deal with the community, and this written test cannot test for any of those attributes.”

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- Harold Lichten

Yet it’s that test that determines who rises up the ranks, based solely on the exam score, and it’s that civil service exam that is being challenged in court. A federal judge ruled in November that Boston’s exam favors white officers. An earlier court finding in a separate suit favored the police department. Appeals are underway.

While these cases were being litigated, Commissioner Evans says the Boston Police Department revised the test, but to no avail:

“We spent over \$2 million last year on the promotional exam to try to change the dynamics, and unfortunately we got the same result.”

Boston, notes Attorney Lichten, is not obligated to use the civil service exam. Instead of altering it, Lichten wants Boston to take a page from the book of other big city police departments like New York, Philadelphia, or Washington.

“Virtually every large city uses a multi-faceted approach to pick people who are promoted to sergeant, lieutenant, and captain, which includes review of performance, assessing their abilities, putting them through simulations, and some job knowledge. None of them use the kind strict multiple choice rote-memory test that Boston has historically used,” says Lichten.

Commissioner Evans says he pushes for diversity where he can.

According to Evans, his command staff is 50 percent minority. He got it that way by bypassing the exam. Evans has the authority to make appointments directly, and he does this at the highest ranks of his command staff.

But Detective Ellison counters that the command staff is just a small fraction of the overall 2-thousand-plus members of the Boston police department, and that those command staff minority appointments, he says, can be counted on two hands.

“The thing you hear the police department touting is how diverse their command staff is. We're talking about less than 10 people that that effects. There's been very little movement when it comes to people of color being hired, of people of color being promoted, when the opportunity presents itself,” says Ellison.

Commissioner Evans claims his hands are tied by the civil service exam determining mid-range promotions, but stands by his high level appointments.

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“It's the first time in the history of our department that we've had three minorities running our district stations. No one ever had three captains, and when I came in we had none running stations. So, that was one of the beefs. I've moved three minorities into the captains positions, so we are at the most diverse leadership than we ever had in our department,” says Evans.

WGBH news counted 26 captains: 23 white, and those three minority appointments. Whether Captains, Lieutenants or Sergeants, one thing everyone does agree on is that minorities are left behind when promotions are based on the civil service exam.

Detective Ellison says the limited opportunities for promotion puts off potential recruits. That, he says, is a loss for Boston's neighborhoods. “We're seeing fewer and fewer officers of color coming on the job. And people feel that, you know what? They like to see people as well not just that look like them but are from the community that can relate to their issues.”

Attorney Lichten says that the Boston Police Department is appealing the November court ruling that found the exam favored white officers. As for the earlier case that the department won and was upheld in appeal, Lichten says that within the next 30 days he will be filing an appeal on behalf of minority Boston Police officers to the U-S Supreme Court.