

General guidelines for hiring a police chief

Hiring a police chief may be one of the most important tasks a municipal leader undertakes. The police are the most visible part of local government, and selecting the right chief is critical to build public trust and community cohesion. The following guidelines are offered by the Vermont Department of Public Safety in conjunction with the Vermont League of Cities & Towns to assist communities in selecting a police chief. These guidelines are intended to be a starting point for hiring and specifics for each community should be reviewed by appropriate human resource and legal experts.

“An effective selection process should be tailored to the unique characteristics of the jurisdiction. At the outset, the local government manager must address several issues, the first being whether to direct the process using existing local government resources, a national executive search firm, or some combination of both. In making this decision, the manager must answer a number of questions: Given its existing resources, does the local government have the capacity to construct a process that local constituencies will perceive as fair, broad based, and capable of attracting the best candidates? Is the human resources staff able to recruit candidates who might not apply unless sought out? Does the human resources staff know the strengths and weaknesses of the police department and is it able to identify a candidate who can meet the challenges facing the department not just today but in the future?”ⁱ

The above quote from a 1999 joint publication of the Police Executive Research Forum and the International City/County Management Association gives some insight into the complexity of hiring a police chief. These considerations are only a few of the many that must be contemplated when preparing to select a new police chief. The sources listed at the end of this document are far more comprehensive than this guide. We strongly recommend that you review them.

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SECTION 1: VERMONT STATE LAW

Chapter 55 of Title 24 Vermont Statutes Annotated covers some matters related to policing. 24 VSA § 1931(a) empowers the municipal legislative body, and in its stead, the town manager, with the authority to appoint a police chief. A police chief shall be a police officer. 24 VSA § 1931(b) states that the direction and control of the entire police force, except as otherwise provided, shall be vested in the chief of police. Some communities may have further definitions regarding this process and authority through their charter.

SECTION 2: COMPOSITION OF THE SELECTION COMMITTEE

Assembling a selection committee and designing a selection process that is regarded as fair, transparent and inclusive is as important as who is eventually selected. If the process is regarded as unjust, it sets the incoming chief up for unnecessary and sometimes insurmountable challenges.

Community voices are crucial in the selection of a new police chief. The hiring authority should seek input from a wide variety of stakeholders and ensure that a diverse selection committee is assembled. Diversity refers not only to diversity of race and gender, but also of class, age, sexual orientation, persons with disabilities and more.

Each community should determine the appropriate size of its search committee. Generally, groups of 5-8 people are easier to coordinate than larger groups. The hiring authority should appoint a chairperson. The committee's role should be made clear at the outset. For instance, is the committee charged with selecting one candidate or a group of finalists? If it is the case that the committee's recommendations are advisory only, that should be clear in the beginning.

Confidentiality is essential – both during the process and once it is complete. The hiring authority may consider having participants on the search committee sign a confidentiality agreement.

SECTION 3: TYPE OF SEARCH

The first question to answer is: Are there any internal candidates that are qualified and interested in becoming the chief? A thorough assessment of internal candidates can save a municipality valuable time and resources. If the selection of an internal candidate is a foregone conclusion, the hiring authority may decide not to advertise the position or invite external candidates to apply. The selection of an internal candidate should be made in consultation with community stakeholders as described in Section 2.

If no obvious internal candidate exists, the hiring authority overseeing the search for a new police chief must decide if they will advertise the opening locally, statewide, regionally, or nationally. As noted in the opening quote, the municipality must decide if they are going to conduct the search themselves or use a consulting service. If a national search is preferred, the use of a consulting service is enormously helpful. Frequently these companies know of numerous well-qualified police leaders who are looking for a new opportunity.

SECTION 4: QUALIFICATIONS

At the outset of the process, the hiring authority should involve the community in developing the qualifications and desired attributes of the police chief. How the community is involved may vary across municipalities, but all are encouraged to leverage technology and broadly solicit community input.

Prior to advertising the vacant position, the municipality should spend time and resources (either on their own or with the assistance of a consultant) doing the following:

1. Reviewing and updating the job description to be sure it fully embodies what the municipality desires in a chief. Are the desired skills, knowledge, abilities, experience, and educational requirements reflective of what the community wants in its chief?

2. Beyond the job description, build a profile of the type of chief who will be successful in your community. Rick Dacri suggestsⁱⁱ:

In developing the profile of your ideal police or fire chief, look at six critical elements: 1) job priorities, including the specific education, experiences, and technical knowledge required; 2) professional characteristics; 3) essential personal traits; 4) negative traits--traits that will make the individual unsuccessful; 5) short term challenges the candidate would face immediately upon starting the job; and 6) long term challenges he/she would face in your community and state. Armed with this profile, you can identify what you need in a candidate, what you do not want, where you should find such a candidate, and what questions you must ask during the interview. You won't find this depth of information in a job description.

3. Creating a community profile that accurately describes the operating environment the new chief will work within. Providing an honest assessment of the short and long-term challenges facing the municipality and police department will help ensure that the process can identify the candidate(s) with the right skill set and experience to be successful.
4. Deciding if the municipality will consider candidates who are certified in another state, or if they will limit the pool of candidates to those who hold Vermont law enforcement certification. (See next section on Out of State candidates).
5. Prior to advertising the position, the municipality should conduct a review of the total compensation package for the police chief to determine if it is competitive.

SECTION 5: OUT OF STATE CANDIDATES

If a municipality is considering hiring a chief who is currently certified as a law enforcement officer in another state, they should know that the chief will have to go through the “waiver” process in order to become a certified law enforcement officer in Vermont. In Vermont there are multiple levels of police officer certification – it is essential that the hiring authority understand what level of certification they want their chief to have. This section presumes that the municipality desires their chief to have “Level III” certification. If a chief does not have “Level III” certification their law enforcement authority will have limitations.

The hiring authority should know that the process of obtaining Vermont law enforcement certification can be lengthy and requires attendance at numerous trainings and completion of a field training program. Please see Appendix B for details.

SECTION 6: RECRUITING & ADVERTISING

There are numerous ways to recruit a new chief. The standard methods of advertising in local media outlets should be augmented by online and social media announcements. All ads, posts or communications should be reviewed to ensure the use of gender-neutral, inclusive language.

Using law enforcement membership organizations' advertising will ensure a broad reach to police professionals outside of Vermont. These resources are particularly helpful in reaching a more diverse audience. Some of these resources include: International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Sheriffs' Association, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, the Police Executive Research Forum, and the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives.

The hiring authority responsible for selecting the police chief should set a timeline for hiring that allows sufficient time for advertising and word of mouth to spread. Generally, the closing date for applications should be no less than four weeks from the date the position was advertised.

SECTION 7: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Community voices are needed early in the process of hiring a new chief. Waiting to bring in community voices until later in the process means missing perspectives on candidates from the community that might differ from the perspectives of those in municipal government.

Although the selection committee is limited in size, it is critical for the community not only to feel as though they have some involvement in the hiring of a new chief, but for that feeling to be justified through the *actual* and *impactful* involvement of community members in the process. This involvement could take the form of input on the desired characteristics and qualifications of the chief, questions to be asked in the oral interviews, or requests for public forums with finalists.

It has been expressed by various citizens throughout the State that ***a significant amount of diversity be represented on hiring and promotion panels, not merely diversity of race and gender, but significantly also of class.*** One community member on a panel is not enough – in addition to tokenizing community participation, it is equally important not to marginalize it.

SECTION 8: THE PROCESS

Clear instructions for application as well as a description of the process should be available to potential applicants.

- a. Application – Applicants should be directed to submit a letter of intent and resume along with any municipal job application. Some agencies ask the

applicant to answer specific questions in their letter. While this is potentially useful in starting to understand an applicant's perspective, it is the case that many applicants will have assistance preparing these communications.

- b. Initial Review – All applications should be reviewed to determine if the person meets the minimum requirements as listed in the job description. Consistent decisions on whether incomplete or late applications will be considered is important.
- c. Secondary Review – The purpose of this review is to begin to rank applicants into different groups. For instance, applicants could be grouped as “highly qualified”, “qualified” and “minimally qualified”. This is a stage where the importance of community involvement in the hiring process is particularly valuable.
- d. In-person panel interview – An initial round of interviews should be arranged for the most qualified applicants. Interviews should be structured in such a way that the same lawful questions are asked of all candidates.
- e. Subsequent interviews, assessment centers or community meetings - The hiring municipality may wish to use multiple rounds of interviews, an assessment center, additional writing exercises, mock media interviews, or other tools to assess the candidates' suitability to be your chief. Inviting a small group of candidates to participate in a community meeting is not uncommon.
- f. Finalist interviews – Once the committee has identified finalists for the position, it is traditional to have additional interviews. If the hiring authority has not been part of this process before now, they should be included at this stage. It may be the case that there are numerous well-qualified applicants, in which case the final interviews can focus more on finding the right “fit” for the position than on qualifications.
- g. Background investigation – this may be the most important part of hiring a new police chief. See Appendix A for an outline of a thorough background investigation.
- h. Polygraph Examination considerations – If the candidate is already certified as a “Level III” Vermont law enforcement officer, a polygraph is not required. If the candidate is not “Level III” certified, they will have to comply with the requirements of the Vermont Criminal Justice Council (VCJC) for becoming certified in Vermont. This process may include a required polygraph exam. The

hiring authority should be sure to contact the VCJC for guidance once a finalist has been identified and before making a final offer of employment.

- i. Final offer of employment – a comprehensive agreement outlining the terms of employment should be made in writing. The hiring authority should direct the candidate to any employment policies that may be applicable outside of the contract. A clear description of the reporting hierarchy as well as a description of any probationary period should be included. This total compensation and work conditions package should be presented to the candidate for consideration prior to any announcement found in section 9 below.

SECTION 9: INTRODUCING YOUR NEW CHIEF TO THE COMMUNITY

Once the hiring process has been completed and an offer has been accepted, it is important that the new chief be presented to the community through a series of announcements and public events. Here the search committee and hiring authority should work together to ensure that public, media and stakeholders are invited to events such as:

- A press conference or release announcing the new chief
- The swearing-in ceremony followed by a meet & greet
- Community events and meetings in the first months.
- Special meetings should be arranged with local leaders, elected officials, fellow department heads and stakeholder groups.

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Sources:

Selecting a Police Chief – A Handbook for Local Government: ICMA guidelines for selecting a police chief, as published by the Police Executive Research Forum, 1999.

“Six Steps to Recruiting a Great Police or Fire Chief”, by Rick Dacri as posted on the NH Municipal Association website 2016.

Police Chief Selection – A Handbook for Local Government, by Michael J. Kelly, 1975 published by ICMA and PERF.

Recruiting & Retaining Women: A Self-Assessment Guide for Law Enforcement, National Center for Women & Policing, 2002.

ⁱ *Selecting a Police Chief*, page 1 -2

ⁱⁱ Dacri, "Six Steps to Recruiting a Great Police or Fire Chief".

APPENDIX A – THOROUGH PRE-EMPLOYMENT BACKGROUND CHECK

Thorough background investigations, by a competently trained background investigator, for hiring new police officers should include (beyond the VCJC minimum requirements) all or most of the following components:

- A properly executed waiver allowing the hiring agency to conduct all of the following and access confidential documents.
- Criminal records check and general police record check in all places the applicant has lived, worked, and attended school.
- Department of Motor Vehicles records check in all places the applicant has lived, worked, and attended school.
- FBI Triple I criminal record check.
- Credit history check.
- “Accurint” report or similar – (Accurint is a paid service that provides information products that allow organizations to extract valuable knowledge from huge amounts of data).
- Interview of current spouse/significant other, children, siblings, parents, former spouses or significant others, and current/former roommates. Some of these names may be provided by the applicant while others must be developed by the background investigator.
- Detailed review of applicant’s social media presence, blogs, etc.
- Neighborhood visit/canvas.
- Review and confirmation of military service records.
- Review of available national or state decertification resources.
- Review and confirmation of prior employment, speaking with supervisors, subordinates and fellow employees and reviewing personnel and disciplinary files. For all applicants with prior law enforcement experience the hiring agency must mandate the applicant complete a waiver and the hiring agency must contact prior agencies as outlined in 20 VSA § 2362a.
- The background investigator should talk to community leaders, prosecutors, other law enforcement leaders in the jurisdiction where the candidate currently or previously worked.
- Review and confirmation of educational information, including any college disciplinary records. A search for and review of any dissertation, theses or scholarly articles is recommended, if relevant.
- Polygraph by a credentialed tester. This should include questions to reveal any known hate or bias motivated activity or affiliation.

Ideally, the officer or contracted consultant doing the background investigation should have attended relevant training for completing comprehensive pre-employment investigations.

APPENDIX B: Waiver process to obtain Vermont Law Enforcement Officer certification

A police agency seeking to hire an individual who is certified as law enforcement officer in another jurisdiction may apply for a waiver, exempting the applicant from Basic Training. Upon successful completion of the process, the applicant receives Level III certification and a full scope of enforcement authority under Vermont law.

Prerequisites:

- Successful completion of a comparable training program. An assessment of the applicant's Basic Training program involves an in-depth review and audit of coursework by VCJC personnel.
- Successful completion of a field training process and graduation from probationary status with their employing out-of-state law enforcement agency, and subsequent employment by that agency totaling more than three (3) years.
- A score of 70% or better on the Vermont Police Academy Entrance Exam, a 100-item multiple choice test of general knowledge.
- Submission of a [Waiver Request Form](#), along with the applicant's training records and accompanying documentation, and a signed release authorizing the VCJC to access and authenticate training records and employment history.
- The VCJC will query the National Law Enforcement Officer Decertification Database prior to accepting the application.

Following a validation that one meets the prerequisites, a completed [Registration Form](#), including an attestation that the applicant is emotionally suited for law enforcement work, [Statement of Completion of Background Investigation](#), and [Medical Exam](#) are required.

Approved applicants are provided with a training prescription which outlines the coursework that must be successfully completed to fulfill all requirements for Vermont Level III Law Enforcement Officer certification.

- A twelve (12) month period is allotted for this process.
- A minimum training prescription includes 5 or more weeks of training (not consecutive; includes Vermont law, DUI, speed enforcement, mental health response, etc.) and is dependent upon how closely the applicant's training history aligns with Vermont's requirements.
- Significant deficiencies may require additional training.
- Substantial or critical deficiencies will result in a denial of a waiver. The agency may then seek to register the applicant for Basic Training.

The first training of primary importance is the "Waiver Course," a Vermont-specific law package that results in the applicant receiving a **provisional** Level III certification, valid for up to twelve (12) months. During that time, the officer must successfully complete all requirements,

including field training. Once all requirements are completed, a ***non-provisional*** certification will be issued.

For current standards, rules, exceptions or to discuss a specific case, contact the Vermont Criminal Justice Council.

Please note: Waiver courses are offered based on demand. Some may choose to enroll their applicant in the Level II certification process to begin their training process sooner.

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