

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O'Hara on his first six months on the job and what's next 01H1W48NA2FFPR6VTRDR37XK0Q

CATHY WURZER: It's now been nearly seven months since Brian O'Hara was confirmed as the police chief of Minneapolis. He was the first police chief appointed after George Floyd died under a Minneapolis police officer's knee. And O'Hara has been entrusted with a big job, a major cultural change within the MPD as the world watches.

Chief O'Hara is a New Jersey native who spent 20 years with the Newark Police Department. We wanted to check in to see how things have been going these past six months and what's on his long to-do list. The chief is with us right now. Welcome back.

BRIAN O'HARA: Hi, Cathy. Thank you for having me.

CATHY WURZER: Thanks for taking the time. Say, I want to begin by asking about this body camera footage that shows you chasing down on foot four juvenile suspects wanted for shooting a Minneapolis Public Schools building, which is something police chiefs normally do not do, to give chase to suspects. Have you done that before?

BRIAN O'HARA: Yes, actually. There's been a few times here in Minneapolis. Actually, the first time was before I was even in Minneapolis police officer. I was in the process. I was involved in a ridealong where we got into a foot chase and actually arrested a person with a gun down at Lake and 12th Street-- 12th Avenue. That was my first time here in Minneapolis.

So I think it's important for the police chief to be present out in the community and to be present out on the street with the police officers. So I try and get out there as often as possible, go to community meetings. And as I'm going to and from places, I have the radio on. I ride around in a squad car like every other cop.

And if I'm close by when something happens, I'm coming, just like I expect every other sworn member of the department to do.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm. You mentioned getting out into the community. And, of course, the MPD has had community meetings recently about what should be done with the 3rd precinct building at the intersection of Lake Street and Minnehaha Avenue, which burned down during the unrest following--

BRIAN O'HARA: Yes.

CATHY WURZER: --George Floyd's death. There really isn't consensus on what to do with that site or where to build the new 3rd precinct building. When you were in Newark, you helped close the precinct at the center of the 1967 uprising there. And I understand there are plans to turn that site into a museum. Can you see something like that working in Minneapolis?

BRIAN O'HARA: Well, in Newark, the council had actually voted for the building to be closed prior to me assuming the role of director there, police director there. So I'm the person that actually carried out the governing body's wishes. And just like here, not everybody agreed with it.

Certain people wanted it still to be a police station. There wasn't a replacement station built for that location. And I know that kind of remains an issue today.

But I feel very strongly, ever since I came here, it is a different situation here in Minneapolis. I think people have open wounds. There's a whole lot of trauma experienced both by our residents and by our police officers that I don't think we've adequately addressed at all.

And I think that's really important for the police department to be a part of owning up for and trying to help start having a conversation so we can really start to heal from some of this. But I do feel very strongly that it is not the role of the police department to say one way or the other where the precinct should be or what we should be doing. I think that's something that should be-- the community should have a voice in, and it should be determined by our elected officials.

CATHY Hmm. Do you think, though, a museum at the former site of the 3rd precinct might be a good idea?

WURZER:

BRIAN O'HARA: Again, I just really believe my role and our role is to help address the underlying issues underlying frustrations, the trauma people have felt, the role that police have had, have played in a lot of that. That's what my role should be, and our role as police officers, trying to figure out and make sure a community has a voice in how we go about reform and what we're going to do differently.

I don't think it's our role at all to try and influence one way or another what we should be doing with the infrastructure. I just don't think that's appropriate. But I do think people have a right, and people should expect to be heard.

They should expect to be able to voice their frustrations, their opinions. And they should expect to have a real and meaningful role in the reform process going forward.

CATHY So you've been here about six months. What has been the biggest surprise for you in the past six months?

WURZER:

BRIAN O'HARA: I mean, honestly, there's been a lot of surprises. This is culturally different, in a lot of ways, than what I am used to. The city government here functions somewhat differently from what I'm used to.

But I tell you, I think one of-- probably the biggest surprise I've had here is just the incredible work that is being done by the small amount of police officers that we have here. This city has lost hundreds of officers. It's comparatively a department that is smaller than major cities on the East Coast to begin with before they lost those officers.

And I think-- I had an impression of this police department, after seeing these blue shirts on my TV every day in New Jersey, just like they were seeing all around the country and all around the world. And I think the impression that I have was definitely wrong compared to the people that are here.

I think the police officers that are here that remain here today are incredibly resilient. They're incredibly hardworking. And I think they're incredibly dedicated to trying to do what's right for our residents and trying to help figure out, how do we move forward and have progress together?

CATHY You know, there is some money in the public safety bill that passed and was signed by Governor Walz this past session to bolster police ranks around the state of Minnesota. There's a lot in that public safety bill, obviously, including a ban on no-knock warrants in the state of Minnesota. Is the MPD still using the no-knock warrants in some circumstances, or are they gone for good?

BRIAN O'HARA: The MPD has not used no-knock warrants, no. And that's actually-- aside from it being a matter of law, that's something that's actually covered under the recent settlement agreement that the city signed with the state.

CATHY OK. Say, a number of listeners, Chief, want to know, in reference to the no-knock warrants, there was, of course,
WURZER: the attention of the no knocks after the death of Amir Locke in February of last year. A number of MPR listeners want to know why the officer who shot and killed Amir Locke and was not charged. Is he still on the force? Where is he?

BRIAN O'HARA: That is something that was resolved before I was hired here, before I became a police officer. As far as administratively, that's not that's not a matter that I was involved in at all.

CATHY OK. Is he still on the force?

WURZER:

BRIAN O'HARA: It remains part of an internal investigation after the-- yes, after the county attorney, the previous county attorney declined to pursue charges. So it remains the subject of an administrative investigation.

CATHY All right. So before you go, what's on your agenda for the next six months in office?

WURZER:

BRIAN O'HARA: We got a whole lot of work to do for sure. We're going to be-- firstly, once we finalize this settlement agreement with the state, we're working on plans on how we go out in community, how we hold town hall meetings to make sure that community has a voice in the MDHR process as we move forward, as we explain what certain policies around very, very high-profile things like stop, search, and arrest, use of force, all of those types of policies, procedures, and training-- community have a voice in revisions to those policies as we move forward and, again, just starting those sort of facilitated discussions where people can feel like they can voice their frustrations over things that they have experienced and help us figure out what we should be doing as a matter of policy and procedure going forward.

I think it's incredibly important that we make sure we do everything we can to get the community's fingerprints on our policies and procedures going forward so that they can feel some legitimacy in the process of reform under the MDHR.

CATHY And how is recruiting of new officers going?

WURZER:

BRIAN O'HARA: We have had some increase in applications. It's not enough. You mentioned the recent legislation from the state, which I think could be helpful.

Another thing that's helpful is we were able to get a bill passed that will create an expedited training program for adults that have an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree that's not related to law enforcement. I think that's particularly helpful because I think it's just oftentimes too difficult for people, particularly people later in life who may choose policing as a second career, who have degrees and experiences in other fields that are directly relevant to skills that we need in law enforcement.

But the way it had been set up in this state for the last four decades, it makes it particularly difficult for people to take time off and go back to community college then before going to a police academy. So I'm hopeful that we'll be able to attract more candidates under some of the different pathways that we have available.

And also, we're trying to put a renewed focus on reaching out to young people from our city, young people from Minneapolis who might be interested in policing that we can hire. We can give them a job. We can pay for their college. And then, once they're done with college, we can hire them as police officers. So we're hopeful that we can pursue these avenues to get good candidates who reflect community values that'll help rebuild the force.

CATHY All right. Chief O'Hara, thank you for your time.

WURZER:

BRIAN O'HARA: Thank you so much, Cathy.

CATHY We've been talking to Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O'Hara.

WURZER:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

By the way, for more on that public safety bill that was passed and signed-- passed by the legislature and signed recently by Governor Tim Walz, you can go to the Politics section at MPRNews.org.