

Hispanic leaders press police to diversify

Dearth of Latinos seen at top of force

By Annie Sweeney

TRIBUNE REPORTER

Hispanic church leaders, seizing on the recent departure of a police commander to highlight the few Latinos at the top of the department, are stepping up pressure on Superintendent Jody Weis to deal with the long-standing problem.

The sudden retirement of Grand Central District Commander Robert Lopez has upset religious leaders and resurrected criticisms that the police department has an abysmal record of promoting Hispanics to the highest levels.

Members of the clergy announced plans to protest at City Hall next week and call for Weis' resignation because of the failure to diversify the department.

"You want our help. You want us to come out and march," said the Rev. Wilfredo De Jesus, pastor of New Life Covenant Church. "They want us to talk to our communities.

They want information. How are we supposed to partner?"

The department's own statistics back up the community's concerns, though they say the problem was

many years in the making. Two assistant superintendents, the highest-ranking post under Weis,



De Jesus

are an African-American man and a Hispanic woman, but the command positions beneath them are heavily staffed by whites, including all four deputy superintendents. Seven Hispanics number among those 87 command positions.

On Thursday night, Weis announced four promotions to top spots — all Hispanic. The department said the timing had nothing to do with the controversy.

Department officials defended Weis' record of promoting Hispanics. In 2009 no Hispanics were promoted based on test scores to any of 20 spots that opened up for lieutenant. But of six positions set aside for merit-based promotions, two went to Hispanics, officials said.

Department officials acknowledge that it's difficult to find minorities to promote to high command positions because of the low number of Hispanic lieutenants and captains. Officials said there have been several moves to address that.

"We've done a little better at the lower levels," said Deputy Superintendent Theodore O'Keefe. "Now it is a matter of trying to cultivate their skills and abilities so they can aspire to positions of leadership."

The department is designing a course to help officers prepare for promotional exams. It now posts openings in task forces and specialized units and accepts applications when a command spot opens, officials said.

Still, the change is coming too slowly, said Ald. George Cardenas, 12th. "There is a tremendous level of anxiety in the Hispanic community," he said.

In a telephone interview, Lopez said he was told last week he was demoted from district commander to the rank of lieutenant. He said he resigned rather than take a position in another district.

Department officials denied that Lopez was demoted or pushed out, insisting he could have stayed on as the Grand Central District commander. But the department said he had a serious crime problem to address

and that the superintendent was demanding a response.

Lopez said he didn't get enough support from headquarters.

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