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Newark changes police and fire leaders James says little about shake-up that puts Rankin on unpaid leave

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Newark Mayor Sharpe James shook up the command of the police and fire departments yesterday, naming acting directors in both departments without giving much of a reason for the change.

Police Director Robert Rankin was placed on unpaid administrative leave, and Police Chief Anthony Ambrose, an 18-year veteran, was named acting director. **Lt. Irving Bradley was named acting police chief, the first African-American chief in Newark's history.**

Fire Director Edward Dunham will become deputy director of the city's Department of Homeland Security.

Fire Chief Lowell Jones, who has held every rank in the department, was named the acting director. Deputy fire chief Norman Esparolini, a firefighter since 1979, was named fire chief. Jones' appointment has to be approved by the city council.

"We are here to increase the safety of all citizens in the city of Newark," James said during a news conference in his office. "We in the city of Newark have always given these two departments our highest priority."

However, James refused to say why Rankin, who has held every rank in the Newark Police Department, was ousted less than two years after taking the job.

James said he was not at liberty to discuss personnel issues for confidentiality reasons, but did say residents have asked for more of a police presence in the neighborhoods.

Business Administrator Richard Monteilh also declined to discuss the reasons behind Rankin's change in status, citing the possibility of litigation, but said he had spoken with Rankin in the past about making changes.

Some council members said they did not believe Rankin was proactive in his position, and James had criticized his recent plan to redeploy 100 officers to patrol the city streets.

Last year, there were 85 homicides in Newark, an increase from the 68 in 2002, but, according to police records overall crime was down.

Councilman Hector Corchado, who is on leave from the police department, said some council members were not happy with Rankin's performance.

"He was reactive, not proactive," said Corchado, comparing Rankin to former Police Director Joseph Santiago.

There was also concern about the increase in homicides. "When the renaissance started, it had a lot to do with crime going down," said Corchado.

Rankin, whose salary increased to \$140,786 this year, declined to comment. A news release he issued last week about crime statistics in Newark said a lack of officers was a concern. The city has not sent a police class to the academy in two years. Rankin announced in February that 100 officers in administrative and investigative positions would begin patrolling the streets.

James criticized Rankin's proposal yesterday, saying that an examination of the proposal would have resulted in only 11 officers returning to patrol.

Ambrose's first act as director was to promise that 150 police officers will be reassigned in the neighborhoods, starting Friday.

"Maybe we need less detectives and more officers," said Ambrose.

Bradley, who is the nephew of Council President Donald Bradley, also promised immediate changes.

"I bring in a strong work ethic. They call me a 24-hour supervisor," said Bradley.

Bradley was the North District Commander and liaison to the Drug Enforcement Agency. His salary as chief is set at \$120,082.

In 1999, Bradley pleaded guilty to resisting arrest, a misdemeanor, for leading Rahway police on a chase after they found him drunk in his vehicle. He also struck one of the officers.

Bradley was allowed to keep his job because the charges were not related to his police duties. "It did not compromise my integrity," said Bradley. "I learned from my mistakes and paid my debt."

The buzz throughout city government and in Trenton is that Santiago will eventually return to Newark as the police director or public safety director

overseeing the police and fire departments. Both James and Ambrose denied this would happen.

Santiago left Newark to become superintendent of the New Jersey State Police in 2002, but resigned just seven turbulent months later after ethical questions arose, including unsubstantiated allegations that he was friendly with two organized crime figures. He was approved as police director in Trenton in February 2003.

Santiago did not return calls for comment, but Trenton Mayor Douglas H. Palmer said Santiago wasn't going anywhere. "Joe Santiago has not given me any indication he plans to leave Trenton," said Palmer.

In other moves, Deputy Police Director Rocco Malanga will head the city's Department of Homeland Security.

James said the move is necessary to help coordinate the response between the police, fire and emergency medical services in case of a terrorism-related disaster.

Malanga has served in law enforcement since 1979, including stints as the director of the Essex County Department of Public Safety.

He was implicated, but never charged in the theft of more than \$1 million from the state Policemen's Benevolent Association. Malanga was expelled from the organization and the Newark PBA lost its charter. "I have served the city for 25 years with distinction," Malanga said when asked about the ethical issues.