

FACING POLITICAL TURMOIL
SAN FRANCISCO POLICE CHIEF ALEX FAGAN

The life expectancy of a city police chief appointed by a mayor, city manager or commissioner is generally three to five years. San Francisco Police Chief Alex Fagan, appointed by Mayor Willie Brown, says, "Accepting a position as Police Chief is always at the pleasure of those who make the appointment. I know that any day I could pick up the phone and the Mayor could ask me to step down. Every Chief knows that serving in this position is tenuous." In San Francisco, Gavin Newsom was elected mayor of San Francisco over Willie Brown, a case in point of a potential political threat to police chief's tenure in office.

Acknowledging the possibility of political upheaval when a police chief first takes office, what guidelines or methodologies can a chief follow to protect his/her position while effectively confronting the multifaceted, not-so-popular issues and responsibilities of the job should a revamping of power occur, starting at the top with the ousting of the Chief?

Anticipating political twists constitutes a complex maze of events in any city. Addressing the question of how a chief can approach his/her tenure in office applicable to chiefs across the nation, says Chief Fagan, is like comparing apples to oranges, each police

chief fulfilling the mission to protect public safety in a different style and mode of operation.

The ability to trump political sweeps and remain in office, hinges not only on how efficiently department policies are administered under a chief's leadership, but also the chief's personal charisma in carrying them out. Public relations, communication, marketing skills and collaboration in everyday management of periphery forces that effect the operation of the office have significant value in anticipating and solving concerns before they become a potential threat to survival.

A chief's political savvy, actively addressing public concerns, serving individuals equally, steering a department with dynamic leadership, maintaining an "open door policy" to citizens and personnel, providing employee incentives, innovating public safety programs and collaborating on solution orientation with the public, city officials and department personnel comprise the official duties of a police chief. How a chief initiates the goals, ethics and professionalism by example in these matters is the "best that a chief can provide," says Chief Fagan, "but it does not guarantee that in that leadership role, feathers will not be ruffled. However, I think if you treat everyone the same way that you want to be treated, you offer a sense of human concern."

Chief Fagan maintains that all individuals should be treated with respect. When a citizen has been traumatized by a crime, Chief Fagan says that his officers are trained to provide emotional assurance to the victim and work actively to find a solution to the problem. In

this way, he adds, each officer is serving the mission of the police department and the community.

San Francisco, characterized as one of the most liberal cities in the nation, is a multi-cultural community with multi-faceted lifestyles. Draped over the top of the peninsula, 70% of the 764,000 residents live in rental flats, apartments and high-rises with a population that explodes to more than a million people during the daytime commute. Based upon a survey in 2001, San Francisco is the fifth safest city in the United States. Citywide, there were 68 homicides in 2002, a one to six percent reduction in burglary, robbery, rape and aggravated assault. Auto boosting, motor vehicle theft increased during the same period, four to five percent while overall Part I crime decreased under one percent. The San Francisco Police Department has 2,300 sworn officers, with an annual operating budget of \$289 million.

In serving the needs of a cross-cultural population, the SFPD receives special training. Although most city police departments do not have “transgender” workshops, in the SFPD all officers from top ranking levels to patrol must undergo four hours of sensitivity training to address the concerns of this significant component of the city’s population. As “first responders,” SFPD policy emphasizes dealing with all people and their individuality, states Chief Fagan. Based upon the policies of the city’s Human Rights Commission, he believes in treating all people with respect, and as a department, serving all segments of the population. He stresses that a police chief, wherever his jurisdiction, must address the issues at hand objectively, and in compliance with the mandates of local

and federal laws. Although the San Francisco Board of Supervisors' policy establishing a nuclear free zone prohibiting nuclear battleships from entering the port may be unique to the area, other cities across the nation have their own set of unique policies/values that a police chief has to enforce.

Since the 60s, San Francisco's open society and culture has been the hub of various protest activity and demonstrations. Chief Fagan says he is proud that the SFPD serves as a model in handling crowd control and peaceful protests, as the department trains extensively in avoiding escalating events that result in criminal violations and that threaten the public safety.

The SFPD initiates a pro-active outreach community program to work with protest organizers prior to a planned event, or when the department or city officials hear of any type of planned protest, they proceed to bring together key individuals for a planning session.

When the war in Iraq was imminent, Chief Fagan, department representatives and other public officials met with leaders of the various protests groups to apprise them of First Amendment demonstration areas and to review city regulations. In October, there were five days of demonstrations with more than 100,000 protestors who planned to shut down the streets and block major intersections while handcuffed together with pipes inserted in a tube. As this occurred, Chief Fagan called in the Fire Department and paramedics to safely cut the handcuffed protestors off the pipes and clear the streets. During that event,

officers were on duty 12 hours, working a 20-hour day with overlapping shifts. When police searched protestors' backpacks left behind on the street, they found wrenches, thought to be used to open fire hydrants to flood the street, ball bearing sling shots, wrist rockets and socks filled with rocks.

The strategy used by the SFPD in handling protestors who are violating city codes is to ride through the streets and announce over a loudspeaker the violations of the targeted group to give them the opportunity to disperse. This pro-active measure was implemented to protect the department from wrongful lawsuits, but Chief Fagan says that there will always be lawsuits despite the well-served actions of officers who are trained to facilitate crowds in a non-confrontational way and monitor activity before an incident occurs. During demonstrations, the department does not photograph officers or protestors as they can legally only tape suspected criminal activity.

Different than most departments, the SFPD uses platoons, comprised of 100 officers to facilitate crowd control instead of using squads of seven. During the Iraq anti-war demonstrations, the department had 900 officers on the street armed with beanbag rounds, should a disturbance occur that could not be controlled through communication. The department, according to Chief Fagan, does not use rubber bullets, tazers or foggers, it works in a crowd control formation using sheer numbers of officers to maintain order and public safety. It was the handling of the 100,000 anti-war demonstrators that Chief Fagan says was one of his greatest accomplishments in office. During the five-day demonstration, strategic collaborative planning between the SF Fire Department, the

police department, the Department of Public Works, and working with city officials resulted in subduing the demonstrators in their effort to shut down the city without comprising public safety.

Although the SFPD has a mounted patrol unit, they are not used during demonstrations. Chief Fagan says that in the past, mounted officers were put in the position of not only protecting public safety, but also protecting the horses from possible injury. He explained that the mounted patrol units better serve the public in safer areas, not only in a public relations capacity but also to deter crime on the beaches and Golden Gate Park.

To pay for additional overtime costs from the October demonstrations, the department was able to apply and receive funds from the Homeland Security Office, based upon the potential threat of terrorist activity associated with the protestors jeopardizing the safety of the city.

Homeland Security is a major priority of police chiefs, however, similar to other police departments, there has been difficulty in receiving cash reimbursements from the HS office to comply with the training and equipment requirements of the Act. During the first year after the Act was passed, the department received \$26.2 million in grants for biohazard suits and training; the next year they received \$28.4 million for assessment of high security targets, equipment, training, and a prevention component. According to Chief Fagan, the amount received from the HS office has not covered the expenditures incurred by the department.

In preparing for a terrorist incident in the city, SFPD cannot legally collect intelligence on individuals, even a suspected terrorist, unless they are associated with criminal activity. The department serves as a partner on several federal task forces responsible for investigating Homeland Security threats, but police are not allowed to conduct terrorist investigations themselves. The SFPD Special Operations and Support Bureau, the equivalent of HS, works with federal agencies in planning for a potential terrorist threat.

Handling major concerns specific to the Gateway City to the Pacific, such as protecting major chemical and petroleum plants, the Federal Reserve Bank, headquarters of monolithic west coast financial institutions, and citizens always under the threat of being shaken up by a devastating earthquake, San Francisco's logistical position is uncharacteristic of other U.S. cities, however, the common bond with other cities is the police chief's role to maintain public safety.

The leadership style and strength of the Chief of Police in unifying divergent forces, unique to each city's political, social, economic and safety issues, is a key component in successfully fulfilling the goals, responsibilities and expectations of the office and ensuring public safety.

Despite the multi-faceted issues ranging from politics to activists, from Homeland Security to natural disasters, Chief Fagan says it is not difficult to serve as SFPD Police Chief. If he makes a mistake, a commonality of the job that crosses all city borders and

size of departments, he admits it. Chief Fagan believes in finding solutions to problems, he does not believe in placing blame. He works to fix a situation by addressing the issues at hand, responding to complaints and utilizing the maximum resources available to find workable resolutions to police-related concerns.

Chief Fagan says that one of the greatest lessons he has learned while serving in the office since August 2003, is how to successfully manage major demonstrations with minimal disruption, to make arrests and to prevent protestors from shutting down the city streets. In further analyzing the duties of a chief, he says the bottom line in serving in an appointed position is keeping in touch with citizens, responding to issues with innovative programs, and working collaboratively with other city/community officials.

Despite political forces, agendas, and accusations or conflict, Chief Fagan says it is part of the job that police chiefs contend with on a daily basis. In the meantime, he is committed to fulfilling the high expectations and goals he has set forth as the leader of the department and protector of the city. As Police Chief of San Francisco, Alex Fagan has committed 32 years to public service through law enforcement and he says he will serve in that capacity as long as the opportunity exists.