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Newsroom

Dean Horwitz Assesses Providence Police Chief

Associate Dean Andrew Horwitz talked to the Brown Daily Herald about the track record of Providence Police Chief Col. Dean Esserman.

The Brown Daily Herald: "[*Taveras to retain Esserman as police chief*](#)" by Sarah Mancone, Staff Writer



April 21, 2011: Despite mixed reviews of Col. Dean Esserman's tenure in office, Providence Mayor Angel Taveras announced April 12 that he will be keeping him as the city's chief of police. Esserman's contract expired Jan. 1 this year.

The decision came following the release of a report by Public Safety Commissioner Steven Pare that recommended retaining Esserman as police chief. The report praises positive changes under Esserman, including his "efforts to diminish political influence in the hiring process, a reduction of crime in Providence and adoption of a community policing model that has garnered national recognition."

But Esserman's time as police chief has been marked by controversy. He was suspended Feb. 7 following a "verbal altercation" at an officer training session. According to multiple press reports, Esserman threatened to throw coffee at an officer when he coughed repeatedly during the chief's speech.

Esserman's contentious relationship with the police union culminated in an overwhelming "no confidence" vote in June 2009. The union pointed to Esserman's unpredictable behavior and tendency to publicly criticize lower-ranking officers.

During the 2010 mayoral campaign, Taveras was the only candidate to say he would consider retaining Esserman as chief.



When Esserman assumed the position in 2003, he took the helm of a "very, very troubled police department," **said Andrew Horwitz, president of the Rhode Island Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and associate dean of academic affairs at Roger Williams University School of Law.**

Corruption in the higher ranks, inadequate training, a long history of violence and a serious morale problem plagued the department when Esserman took charge, **Horwitz said.**

The police department has seen a number of high-profile corruption cases in recent years. Last June, 24 people, including four Providence police officers and one Department of Corrections employee, were charged in Operation Deception, an FBI investigation of a cocaine operation led by an officer's brother. The trial of Providence Detective Robert DeCarlo, who was accused of police brutality following an arrest in a College Hill parking lot, is still ongoing.

Esserman did not come up through the ranks of the Providence police, and this unconventional route made him the second outsider to become chief in the department's history. Esserman has never been a street officer. A Dartmouth College graduate, he holds a law degree from New York University and worked as an attorney in New York City before becoming assistant chief of police in New Haven, Conn. He later served as chief of police in Stamford, Conn. Former Mayor and current Rep. David Cicilline '83, D-RI, appointed Esserman upon taking office.

Guido Laorenza, chief of police before Esserman, said there were some isolated problems in the department prior to Esserman's tenure, and little has changed since then.

Esserman has attempted to create the impression of doing more to eradicate corruption than he actually has, Laorenza said, adding that Esserman cares more about his self-image than the department. "He is certainly not what he appears to be," he said.

Laorenza said most of the other police chiefs in Rhode Island and many of his own officers do not like Esserman.

But **Horwitz said** Esserman has earned many supporters during his tenure. Esserman's ambitious agenda for turning around the department meant he was "not going to be a popular person," **Horwitz said**.

Multiple former and active members of the Providence police force declined to comment.

While Esserman has not been able to fully address all the department's problems, "he has made a lot of positive changes," **Horwitz said**.

According to the press release, Esserman was tasked with "leading the department's efforts to increase public safety through a citywide community policing model that would re-engage the public in a meaningful way." The report cites the implementation of this policy as one of Esserman's most significant achievements.

"I support the community policing model that the department has put into place and look forward to working with Chief Esserman and all members of the force to continue with programming that reduces crime, enhances public safety in Providence and deepens trust between police and the community," Taveras said in a press release.

Laorenza said he does not think Esserman has been very effective and cannot be given all the credit for moving the department forward. Esserman is merely "presenting a front," he said.

Overall, there are still problems in the department that have not yet been fixed, **Horwitz said**.

Pare's report includes 17 recommendations and eight new goals for improving the department.

"I believe (Pare's) analysis and recommendations set the right direction as we move forward to build on the Department's strengths and address areas where we can improve," Taveras said in the press release.

For full story, click [here](http://www.browndailyherald.com/2011/04/21/taveras-to-retain-esserman-as-police-chief). [http://www.browndailyherald.com/2011/04/21/taveras-to-retain-esserman-as-police-chief]