

## **North Ridgeville Police Department Review**

To: Mayor Kevin Corcoran, City of North Ridgeville and Brian Moriarty, Law Director

From: Jeremy Iosue<sup>1</sup>, Stefanik Iosue & Associates, LLC and Stella Skaljic<sup>2</sup>, ImagineHR, LLC

Date: September 15, 2023

Re: Police Department Review

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### **BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY**

The City of North Ridgeville is located in Lorain County, Ohio. The City has approximately 36,000 residents and is one of the fastest growing cities in Northeast Ohio. It was most recently ranked as the 13<sup>th</sup> safest City in Ohio. The police department employs approximately 50 people in the roles of Chief, Captain, Lieutenant, Sergeant, Patrol Officer, Dispatcher, Detective, Custodian and Administrative Assistant. Mike Freeman has been the Police Chief for approximately 12 years.

Over the course of time, the City has fielded complaints about morale, turnover and overall difficulties in the department. The specific issues in the complaint date back to the beginning of Chief Freeman's tenure. Based on these issues, and the on-going complaints about morale and leadership in the department, the City determined that it was in their best interest to conduct a comprehensive evaluation and review of the Police Department. To ensure that the review was conducted in an impartial, unbiased manner, the City retained outside counsel. In January of 2023, the City engaged Jeremy Iosue and Stella Skaljic. Beginning in June of 2023, Iosue and Skaljic led the review and spoke with approximately 60 individuals (mostly current employees of the Department and roughly 10 former employees). These individuals included all employees in the Police department. In addition, we spoke to Chief's of other departments, former Chiefs and other management consultants.

All current employees received an Employee Opinion Survey to complete and each was interviewed by Iosue or Skaljic. All interviews took place via phone and all were provided time to expand on their particular experiences and share any other relevant information. The calls were generally between 1-2 hours and were scheduled from the end of June through the beginning of August. Everyone we spoke with was cooperative and willing to provide open and candid feedback. From a credibility standpoint, everyone's feedback appeared to be genuine,

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based on personal experiences, and no one gave us reason to believe that they were fabricating their statements.

We explained that the review process was intended to understand, at a deeper level, what has been contributing to the morale and turnover issues within the Department. We also explained that the process was intended to gather factual information and examples that could shed light on the overall working environment, culture, and practices of the Department. Due to the high level of concern that their names would be revealed, we assured all participants that our report would not include specific names.

On August 11, 2023, we met in person with Chief Freeman at the North Ridgeville Police Department. This meeting lasted approximately 3 ½ hours. We provided Chief Freeman with a list of questions in advance and asked follow-up questions regarding specific alleged incidents. Overall, Chief Freeman was very cooperative in answering our questions and emphatically denied any wrongdoing. He did admit to certain behaviors but felt that his level of competency and his other 'protocols and policies' which he adheres to in running the Department are all intended to promote safety, reduce liability, and operate efficiently.

The one common thread throughout this process was that every individual (from the dispatchers to the officers to the Chief) seemed genuinely passionate about serving the City. There were obvious objectives and goals that everyone shared, with the ultimate goal of maintaining the City's status as one of the safest in Ohio. It is clear that the employees are passionate about the community and most agree that the needs of the community are paramount. Most truly enjoy serving the community and put the residents first. The Chief shares this sentiment. He spoke very passionately about the community and agrees that the Department should do its best to serve the citizens of North Ridgeville. The Chief's sincerity on this issue was clear. In addition, every employee feels that the Chief is an extremely hard worker and that he is very intelligent. No one questioned his work ethic or dedication to the community. It seems that both the employees and the Chief have a shared passion for the community and dedication to its residents. Hopefully this shared passion will allow the department to move forward with recommendations in this report and a continued commitment to the City and its residents.

The differences in opinion (which have and continue to create varying degrees of tension and conflict) relate to "how" the City reaches its goals; "how" the City measures productivity; and "how" the Chief leads the Department. From our perspective, these differences in opinion are causing the Chief and his administration to clash with the majority of officers and dispatchers. In addition to these differences of opinion, it is abundantly clear from our interviews and feedback that the Chief has a management/communication style that is often perceived as micro-managing, abrasive and at times, hostile. Employees raised issues with the Chief's involvement in day-to-day, frontline police work and his lack of trust in department personnel. In addition, there are issues with lack of productivity from officers and a recent "slow-down" in the number of traffic stops. Everyone in the department bears some responsibility for these issues.

Much of this report will be focused on the issues and differences of opinion that are causing turnover and lowered morale in the Police Department. While there were positive statements given about the Chief – many feel he is extremely intelligent and hardworking – the report will focus on the constructive feedback, areas of improvements, and concerns and frustrations relayed to us by the majority. In addition, there was a consensus that, just as with any organization, there are employees that are high performers and employees that are low performers. In gathering the feedback, our goal was to focus on common themes and the majority consensus. Although there are personal opinions and plenty of individual experiences, we feel it's most productive to focus on the sentiments that continued to emerge. We did not include issues raised by one or two people. We focused on issues that arose consistently and were corroborated by many individuals.

In addition to the positive feedback regarding work ethic and intelligence, some administrative employees expanded on the positive feedback. These individuals feel that the Chief is not being given a fair chance and that he is simply “holding people accountable” who are “not doing their jobs correctly.” One employee, in defense of the Chief, described the culture as “entitled and lazy” referring to a “certain portion of the workforce who want the hefty paycheck with very minimal work.” There was a sentiment among the Chief’s direct reports that the issue is that the “supervisors don’t supervise and then it falls on the Chief to manage things... ultimately leading everyone to accuse the Chief of micro-managing.”

The Chief and a few other individuals feel that people have left the Department because they are “getting more money elsewhere” and that it has nothing to do with the culture and leadership. These same individuals feel that there is a lack of self-responsibility and initiative among some of the officers and feel that the news stories and publicity is “overblown,” and that Department is “not as horrible and oppressive” as some make it out to be.

Some of the newer officers and dispatchers did not have much to say as they have not experienced any unprofessional situations first-hand. They said they have “heard about certain situations involving the Chief but overall feel communication is good and that they have been treated professionally.” They are relatively optimistic that the Department will make improvements and get back on track. Some new officers and dispatchers say they are “trying to ignore what is going on” but are “concerned about the morale issues and the reputation of the Department.”

The majority of the findings are focused on the current employee interviews and feedback; however, we do think it is important to recognize the input of the former employees that reached out to us as well. We do believe it was noteworthy that several former employees were willing to discuss their issues and personal experiences while at the Department. Many even reached out to us unsolicited. The former employees provided a unique and longer-term perspective. Many of the former employees we spoke with had military backgrounds and understood the para-military culture of the Department. However, they felt that the Chief’s style of management and

overall demeanor goes well beyond the normal “command and control” style of leadership and perceived it as “hostile and retaliatory” at times.

## **FINDINGS AND OVERVIEW**

For the purpose of relaying the feedback from the employees in the most logical way, we believe it is best to discuss the issues in three distinct categories – (1) **Lower-Level Issues**; (2) **Mid-Level Concerns**; and (3) **Serious or High-Stakes Matters**.

**Lower-Level Issues** will include feedback that is ultimately the prerogative and discretion of City leadership. Many of the issues at this level are common in many organizations of any type, including most police departments. This category includes opinions and perspectives on certain Department issues/priorities that may cause some level of frustration but are considered less problematic in the broader scope of the evaluation. These are issues that may affect morale but are not as concerning from a safety/liability/reputational standpoint as other more significant issues discussed in the other categories. In the end, the City will have to determine what the right course of action will be as it relates to the Lower-Level Issues.

**Mid-Level Concerns** include issues relating to the daily operations of the Department and the decisions the Chief makes with regard to policies and procedures. These, along with other issues can cause lowered morale and turnover, and can be more problematic and detrimental to the functioning of the Department as a whole.

**Serious/High-Stakes Matters** involve issues that others perceive as borderline hostile, abusive, and undermine the functioning of the Department. This category can affect the safety, reputation and liability of the City in a severe way if not promptly addressed and resolved.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

We found validity in many of the claims raised by employees in this review. We also found the Chief’s responses to be sincere. Our focus in this summary and in our recommendations focus on those issues that we found to be Serious/High Stakes Matters. On the Lower Level Concerns, we still believe the City should work to improve these issues, however, we found them to be typical issues in many organizations. We will mention those issues, however, the crux of our recommendations will be on the Serious/High Stakes issues. We believe the following succinctly summarizes the issues expressed herein:

### **1. Lower Level Issues:**

- a. **Focus on traffic stops and tickets** – There is a perception that the focus on traffic stops and ticketing is too great. We recommend that the Chief work with his supervisors to determine the best way to assure the proper focus on traffic stops and ticketing
- b. **Officer and Dispatcher Training** – There were concerns about the amount of professional development training, and a concern about some of the FTOs and the training they provide to new hires. We recommend that the Chief works with his

supervisors, officers and dispatchers to assure that they receive an appropriate amount of training – this includes training for professional development, and FTO training for new hires.

- c. Performance Evaluations – We recommend performance evaluation training for all supervisors. We also recommend that the Chief work with his supervisor to assure that evaluations are effective and occur only as frequently as necessary to be effective.
- d. Failure to seek or utilize input from other members of the Department – We recommend that the Chief meet with his supervisors on a regular basis to help chart the course of the department. Initially, we recommend that these meetings occur weekly. The frequency can be reduced as progress is made.

## **2. Mid-Level and Serious/High Stakes Matters**

### **a. Micromanagement (Mid-Level and Serious)**

- i. Micromanagement (Mid-Level) – The Chief is overly involved in report writing and performance evaluations, and other administrative functions of the supervisors.
- ii. Micromanagement (Serious/High Stakes) – The Chief is overly involved in front-line police work; inserting himself into pursuits, crime scenes and other patrol work.
- iii. The Chief is overly concerned with potential liability – This creates a constant fear that his supervisors and employees will “screw-up.” This, in turn, causes him to insert himself into situations and unknowingly undermine his supervisors. This also likely creates an unhealthy stress level that causes the Chief to lash-out at his employees – particularly if his authority is questioned, or if he perceives that his authority is being questioned.
- iv. This micromanagement ultimately leads to low morale, which leads to turnover, which leads to short staffing, which leads to increased stress for employees, which leads to call-offs, which leads to lower morale, and the cycle continues.
- v. This is a common issue in organizations that promote from within through testing procedures. The skills that make someone a good police officer are different than the skills required to be a good leader. However, leaders generally attend training and make efforts to improve their leadership skills and learn to relinquish control to their supervisors and officers.
- vi. We feel that this micromanagement and need to be involved on the frontlines is exacerbated by the Chief’s non-exempt/hourly pay status.<sup>3</sup> When asked, the Chief stated that he only works overtime when others

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the Fire Chief is also non-exempt, and we recommend a change in this status as well.

refuse to do so. We believe this statement to be true. We don't believe that the Chief has committed any wrongdoing with this status, however, there could certainly be a perception that the person controlling overtime shifts can also assign overtime to himself. Moreover, hourly pay status is generally reserved for non-management employees. Therefore, we feel this contributes to the Chief's need to be involved in non-management activities, and the City should change the Chief's FLSA status to "Exempt/Salaried."

**b. Treatment of Employees. (Serious)**

- i. Nearly every employee had several stories about being publicly and/or privately berated by the Chief. Those that hadn't been berated by the Chief, had witnessed such behavior towards other employees. While the behavior itself is troubling, the public nature of many incidents makes it even more troubling.
- ii. The 'walking on eggshells' sentiment that many people shared is also troubling. It creates a high stress and unpredictable environment. There also appears to be a chilling effect – many supervisors/officers have stopped putting forth their opinions and ideas because they don't want to be met with belittlement or anger.
- iii. Again, the lack of trust and worry about liability leads the Chief to micromanage and, at times lash out at employees. We believe the Chief is a good person whose heart is in the right place. However, his inability to relinquish some control creates stress for himself and his employees.

**c. Chief's role in motivating and retaining employees. (Serious)**

- i. Retention and motivation – The Chief does not acknowledge nor believe that retention and motivation are his responsibility. He believes employees and officers leave the Department solely for more money at other departments; therefore, does not believe there is anything he can do to control this. However, mentoring and motivating employees is the MOST IMPORTANT role of a Chief or leader, particularly in today's labor climate where it is challenging to attract and retain qualified individuals.
- ii. Lack of trust and empowerment – His supervisors and officers are charged with carrying out daily police functions. While the Chief should absolutely hold his supervisors and employees accountable when they fail, he should not be inserting himself into daily operations like pursuits and crime scenes. His lack of trust and empowerment appears to be a root cause of the morale and turnover issues.
- iii. Consistently applying policies – The lack of consistency in applying policies (or the perception of this) creates a sense of unfairness and inequity. The

Chief would benefit from communicating clear policies and procedures and then holding everyone uniformly accountable. In addition, he could do a better job of explaining “why” he has made certain decisions or deviations from policy.

- iv. Showing appreciation – There is a lack of appreciation and feeling valued within the Department. The Chief would benefit from offering more praise and positive feedback. This can help motivate employees and can be a good retention tool for the Department.
- v. Listening and collaborating – The Chief would highly benefit from genuinely listening to his subordinates. Many have good ideas and, even if it is a program or initiative that cannot be immediately implemented, there should be a level of respect and professional communication when discussing potential ideas.
- vi. Leadership Training – Leadership Training such as FBI academies speak directly to the issues outlined in this report (micromanagement, motivation, retention, collaboration, generational differences, etc.). We believe this type of training, if undertaken sincerely, would be invaluable to both the Chief and the Department. This would ultimately benefit the residents of North Ridgeville. Chief Freeman sincerely believes that the residents of the City are the most important consideration. The employees feel the same way. For the good of the residents, leadership training and continued development of leadership skills is imperative for both the Chief and his supervisors.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on all of the information provided, termination of the Chief is not a viable option. Not only has the City been ranked as one of the safest cities in Ohio, if not the nation, during the time the Chief has been in that position, but he has an impressive personnel file with little disciplinary history. This, coupled with his hard work ethic and dedication to the Department has earned him an opportunity to address the areas of concern outlined below.

Moreover, in an environment where a termination requires “cause,” we don’t feel that termination would be an appropriate remedy at this time. A “for cause” termination generally requires timely discipline for contemporaneous acts. Generally, you cannot prove “cause” by piling up twelve (12) years of behavior to terminate someone’s employment. The burden would be on the City to show that they had “cause” for a termination of this type. Based on our experience in the field, we do not believe that the City could meet that burden. Additionally, the City would essentially have to win several “trials” in different venues over a long period of time to sustain such a “for cause” termination.

We do feel that there are serious concerns and we have noted those concerns in this report. We also feel that, had these issues been reported as they occurred over the years, progressive

disciplinary action would have resulted in improvements by the Chief, or they would have resulted in termination for cause. Finally, we hope that the Chief's passion for the community and the City's stellar safety reputation will cause Chief Freeman to sincerely acknowledge the feedback provided in this report, and engage fully in the recommendations below:

1. **Modify the Chief's FLSA Status from Non-Exempt/Hourly to Exempt/Salary.** It is rare for a Police Chief, or any Chief Executive to maintain non-exempt status and the ability to earn overtime. The Chief's sole focus should be on the strategic vision of the Department and in the motivation, retention and development of his supervisors and employees.
2. **Mandate Leadership Training for the Chief and all Supervisors Immediately.** Rising through the ranks did not provide Chief Freeman, or his supervisors with the necessary leadership skills. North Ridgeville is not alone in that regard – it is common in the industry. However, the right development and coaching can provide awareness of shortcomings and tools to improve them. In addition, the world and the police profession are constantly evolving, so on-going development is key. The management skills that made good leaders ten (10) years ago are not the same skills that make someone a good leader today. We recommend intensive leadership training through the FBI LEEDA academies, or an assessment and coaching through PRADCO (PRADCO performs the civil service assessments for the City). These academies and assessments speak directly to many of the issues uncovered during this review process. There are other similar programs through other agencies that the City may choose instead.
3. **Institute or Modify the Harassment, Bullying and Intimidation Policy with a Very Specific Reporting Procedure.** This policy should include examples of behaviors, a detailed reporting procedure with explicitly defined personnel for reporting, and an outline of the investigation process. This is a sound practice in any organization. This gives the City notice of an issue as it is occurring. It will allow the City to be more responsive and correct issues as they occur. It also helps the City to avoid liability for any type of harassment or intimidation by any of its employees. Additionally, we recommend training for employees on this policy to assure understanding of everyone in the organization and to encourage contemporaneous reporting of issues.
4. **Require the Chief to Adequately Explain Any Involvement in Front-line Policing Activities to the Satisfaction of the Mayor.** Ohio Revised Code 737.06 gives the Chief of Police exclusive authority in "stationing" and utilizing his officers. However, this is under the general direction of the Mayor. Therefore, the Chief has the authority to insert himself into patrol activities, but the Mayor must hold him accountable and assure that he is using that authority properly. If he is inserting himself into situations without good cause, he should be held accountable, up to and including termination of employment if the Mayor feels the Chief's involvement is unwarranted or unsafe. Ultimately, the Chief should cease



all involvement in the functions of his supervisors and patrol officers unless it is necessary to maintain the safety of the public. It is incumbent on the Mayor to make this determination on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, we believe that compliance with the above recommendations should occur in short order. We recommend a very strict Performance Improvement Plan with the Chief. If he does not comply with the directives in the plan, the City should immediately take disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

Respectfully submitted,

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