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Baltimore's interim police chief speaks as he steps up to take over a department in crisis

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May 18--When Gary Tuggle suddenly became Baltimore's interim police commissioner, he thought of his late parents and their love for the modest, blue-collar pocket of East Baltimore where they raised him and his nine siblings.

He knew they'd want their high-achieving son to help their beloved city, he said, which like their old neighborhood around Biddle Street has fallen on hard times.

"I thought they would approve -- big time," Tuggle said. "They know me, they know their son, they know what I'm capable of, and that once I put my mind to something, I generally get it accomplished."

Tuggle, 54, served as a Baltimore police officer in the 1980s before a long career with the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. He returned to the city department in March as deputy police commissioner. And this month, when Commissioner Darryl De Sousa was charged with failing to file federal tax returns, Mayor Catherine Pugh made him interim commissioner.

He takes over a department in crisis. The city is suffering historic violence. The department is laboring under a federal consent decree mandating sweeping reforms. And it's reeling from a series of scandals, including the convictions of a team of detectives-turned-robbers and the federal charges against De Sousa, who resigned Tuesday.



The scandals have further damaged whatever trust was left among the many residents who the Department of Justice says have suffered for years under discriminatory and unconstitutional policing tactics -- particularly in poor, predominantly black neighborhoods, like the one in which Tuggle was raised.

Complicating the challenge: Tuggle's appointment is not permanent. Interim commissioners of the past say the uncertainty of the job makes it more difficult.

Pugh says her administration will conduct a national search for De Sousa's replacement and consider internal and external candidates. She has not provided a timeline. Tuggle won't say whether he wants the job permanently.

"I haven't even had a solid discussion with my wife about it," he told The Baltimore Sun. "What I want to see is what has been mandated by the mayor -- and that is that we fix the problems that exist. And I'm certainly willing to do that."

It won't be easy. Violence trails last year's record pace, but remains well above five-year averages. And scrutiny of the department is at an all-time high, with federal overseers closely watching for compliance with reforms and the public desperate for improved safety but wary of overpolicing in historically harassed communities.

But people who know Tuggle, and some policing analysts, say he has the experience and background to succeed in the role, whether in the short or long term.

In the early 1990s, DEA agent Ed Marcinko was responsible for administering the physical fitness test for recruits coming through the Baltimore office. Marcinko said Tuggle stood out immediately for his confidence, charisma and knowledge of policing.

"He had a positive aura about him," Marcinko said. "I dealt with hundreds of applicants and some of them stand out and he was one I remember standing out."

Tuggle graduated first in his class of recruits. Marcinko has retired but has stayed in touch with Tuggle.

"I said, 'That man's going to go places.'"

He did. In 1995, he was sent by the DEA to Barbados to work drug cases in the Caribbean. He later served in Trinidad.

In 2013, Tuggle returned to the city to lead the agency's Baltimore office. Two decades after training Tuggle as a recruit, Marcinko worked with him again.

Marcinko said agents are always apprehensive when a new boss arrives, but Tuggle easily won their support. He focused on the highest volume drug dealers, Marcinko said, and was adept at the bureaucratic maneuvering necessary to secure the resources needed for the biggest cases.

"He was an agent's agent," Marcinko said. "He didn't walk around like he was better than anybody."

For Tuggle, the assignment was personal. He was returning to the streets where he had grown up. Marcinko said he expressed a clear desire to help his hometown.

Tuggle was promoted in 2015 to run the DEA's Philadelphia division. That put him charge of about 320 personnel in half a dozen offices across Pennsylvania and Delaware.

Patrick Trainor, a senior agent who served as Tuggle's spokesman, described Tuggle as a progressive leader who looked for unconventional approaches to tackling the opioid crisis, which claimed some 1,700 lives in Pennsylvania the year Tuggle took over.

That year, Pittsburgh was chosen to pilot a program called DEA 360 that combined large criminal investigations, oversight and education of legal drug manufacturers and distributors, and partnerships with community groups to warn about the dangers of heroin and prescription pills.

"We're dealing with community organizations and local leaders and people who are faith-based folks to address this and raise awareness about it," Trainor said. "Gary was very good and very knowledgeable about all of those pieces."

Tuggle also continued to focus on large drug dealing organizations, overseeing an investigation that led to the seizure of 40 kilograms of the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl, which local media described as being enough of the drug to kill hundreds of thousands of people.

There are significant differences between federal law enforcement and local policing. Federal agencies have more discretion than local departments to choose which cases to take on, can pursue cases over months or years, and are not responsible for controlling crime on the streets. Marcinko said there will be a learning curve for Tuggle, but he'll be up to it.

"Gary picks things up very fast," he said.

One day this week, Tuggle hosted police officials from Chicago and Los Angeles, who came to see how Baltimore was implementing predictive policing methods developed in Los Angeles and put into action in recent years in Chicago.

Anthony Guglielmi, a former Baltimore Police spokesman who now serves in a similar role for Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson, said Tuggle seemed confident, and engaged in the on-the-ground police work they were observing.

Johnson and Tuggle discussed "how the departments have gone through a similar process, and how we are working to ensure that we stay focused on the crime fight," Guglielmi said. At a Western District intelligence briefing, he said, Tuggle seemed "very, very engaged."

Tony Barksdale, the last man to serve as an interim commissioner amid a national search, said the role brings its own challenges. He said commanders under Tuggle will jockey for position while speculating about whether he will last.

"When you've got this type of turmoil at the top, the structure, the unity of command, it gets loose," Barksdale said. To be successful, he said, Tuggle will have to be tough, professionally and personally.

"It's a whole lot. I hope he paces himself, that he takes care of himself, and spends appropriate time with his family, because that job will kill you," Barksdale said. "He's going to definitely have to push issues down and hold people accountable."

Tuggle, a graduate of Patterson High School and Coppin State University with two advanced degrees from Johns Hopkins University, said he is acutely aware of Baltimore's challenges. He said family members have dealt with addiction, and some got into crime.

In that way, his family's story is like that of many in Baltimore -- and he said they help inform his understanding of the city.

Tuggle is a married father of four. His youngest daughter graduates from high school this year. He lives in Upper Marlboro in Prince George's County. He would have to move to Baltimore to be permanent commissioner.

He said he sees potential and promise in the department. He said it's full of talented officers who care about the city, want to reduce crime and want to restore their agency's once-proud reputation.

His role as interim commissioner, while it lasts, he said, is to "move the ball forward" on all those fronts.

"We've got a solid strategy," he said. "My responsibility now is to communicate it clearly to the troops, communicate it often, and give them the support that they need."

"The crime fight is multifaceted and it includes things like enhanced community engagement and proactive community policing. And part of that is ensuring that we improve the perception of the police department and improve the morale within the police department."

In thinking in recent days about how to get there, he said, he has focused on a couple of things from his past.

One is the way officers used to rely on each other to keep themselves in line, when one was having a bad day, getting loud with members of the public or straying from the mission.

"We held each other accountable at the street level. We sort of kept each other in check," he said. "It wasn't about your supervisor checking you, it was about your partner checking you to say, 'Hey, let's cut it out.'"

"I think somewhere along the way we lost that."

The other thing he has thought about is how he got into policing in the first place.



Back in his old neighborhood, there was a police officer who used to walk the beat named Rick Hite.

Hite would go on to lead patrol, and the department's youth division, and eventually to leave the department to become the police chief in Indianapolis. He also headed the Vanguard Justice Society, an organization for black and other minority and women officers.

But around Biddle Street, Hite was just the cop who walked foot around Tuggle's parents' house.

"He always spoke to me. He would always say hello," Tuggle said. "He got to know my mother, got to know my father, and became a very good friend of the family. He's the person that actually convinced me to go into law enforcement. I had no idea that's how I would end up."

Tuggle was studying at Coppin and working a security job around Harbor Place. Hite talked to him about joining the police department, then talked to Tuggle's parents about it.

Tuggle said he'll never forget – and intends to stress in his new role – Hite's example of true police-community engagement, and the impact it's had on his life.

"That's why I believe so strongly in officers engaging at the most basic levels," he said. "Because you never know who you are going to influence."

Hite called Tuggle's appointment "a true-to-life, boy-next-door-does-well kind of a story, where he came through the muck and the mire of the neighborhood."

He said he met Tuggle in the 1980s, when first cocaine and then crack cocaine were ravaging neighborhoods and drug gangs were recruiting teenagers in greater and greater numbers.

Tuggle, he said, was "different," so he took him under his wing.

"He was a kid who listened. He stepped over the addicts and drug dealers every day to get to school," Hite said. "Watching this kid go to school every day and push past all the minutiae and challenges to get there was very special to me."

Hite said he believes Tuggle's "tenacity," and even more so his understanding of Baltimore, will position him for success in his new role.

"His being able to do it," Hite said, "comes down to him recognizing what he's facing."

Gary Tuggle

Age: 54

