

**POLITICS (/POLITICS)**

# Meet Seattle's new police chief: Carmen Best

by David Kroman (/author/david-kroman) / January 7, 2018



*Seattle Deputy Police Chief Carmen Best, center, is applauded by Police Chief Kathleen O'Toole, right, and former King County Sheriff Sue Rahr at a news conference announcing Best would be serving as interim police chief starting Jan. 1, 2018. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)*

Carmen Best is the first African-American woman to lead the Seattle Police Department, a job she took over as of Jan. 1 when Chief Kathleen O'Toole's departure became official. Best is chief on an interim basis for now but she has applied for the permanent job. Although Mayor Jenny Durkan has promised a national search to replace O'Toole, it's hard to not see Best as a favorite nominee: a Tacoma native who has risen through the ranks in her 26-year career with the SPD; an officer who has built relationships with both the rank-and-file and with the community-at-large; and, as second-in-command for the past 3.5 years, the heir apparent to continuing on O'Toole's path for the department.

The mayor hopes to choose the permanent chief by this spring. In the meantime, Best inherits a 1,400-officer department that remains under a shadow of a federal consent decree struck to reverse SPD's pattern of excessive force.

In her first week on the job, Best suggested the 40th floor Starbucks in the Columbia Center for an interview. But when she arrived, she looked around and suggested we "go upstairs" instead.

Upstairs was the members-only (and pricey – \$287-per-month) Columbia Tower Club. Inside, the bar is cavernous, with a staircase and spectacular views of the ferris wheel and ferries below.

O'Toole – Best's predecessor and mentor – happened to be sitting at the bar with her daughter and the SPD's Chief Legal Officer Rebecca Boatright and for a moment I wonder if this scheduled interview is some sort of ambush. Apparently, it's just a coincidence. Best greets O'Toole. The bartender greets the chief as "Ms. Best."

We sit in one of the booths — inset into a nook as if meant for private conversations — drink water and talk police culture, race and her goals for leading the 24th largest department in the country.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**What will you do that's different than what Chief O'Toole has done?**

A lot of what I'm going to be doing is just carrying on what she came here in part to do, which is making sure we reform the organization in a way that's real and meaningful.

We want to stay on the trajectory, move forward and try to get there and have in place what we believe to be an iterative process so you're not like, 'Reform on Tuesday.' That's not how it works.

**When you talk about changing culture, one thing I've heard people talk about is this sort of insider/outsider dynamic. In the event you become the permanent chief, you've come up through the department. How do you change the culture of a place where you've sort of grown up in?**

I think it comes with its challenges, but I think it's probably easier in some ways because I do know the culture. I'm not learning how we operate. I was here in 2011 when [the consent decree reform process] started and I know how the feeling was within the organization. We've gone through a lot of changes and I know we've improved and I know it's better. I know that for a fact. The data shows that, but I also know that intuitively.

Certainly, we're not done. But we've done some great improvement and I've seen that because I actually know where we started. I actually remember when we had to just do the rubber stamp on use-of-force statements.

**How do you balance keeping the rank-and-file satisfied while also keeping people like Rev. Harriett Walden [founder of Mothers for Police Accountability] who have an interest in accountability and reform happy?**

My goal is to do the right thing. Doing the right thing doesn't always mean keeping everybody happy. I don't walk in and say, 'I hope everybody I talk to today is happy.' What I do hope is that we have a mission, we have a vision, we're trying to make sure that policies and procedures are followed, that training is appropriate, that officers recognize that behavior matters and that our interaction with the community matters. That the community knows that we're here.

We're here to serve the community. That's why we're here, that's why we exist. A lot of times you do the best you can and try to do the right thing and everybody's unhappy, to be honest with you! [laughs] But I'm just trying to keep that in mind. Being a really true and honest broker and really true about what your goal and mission.

And I actually find I'm in a good place to do that. I mean this sincerely. I'm at the end of my career. I've been in the department 26 years and I'm 52. So literally half of my life is in the SPD. You start reflecting on what happened here. *What did I do? From when I came in, How have I changed? How have I grown? How have I helped the agency? How have I helped the community that I love?*

**You're the first African American woman to lead the Seattle Police Department. There's a lot of discussion about law enforcement and race in this country. Have you talked about this with your two daughters?**

Of course. How can you live in the society we live in today and not have conversations about race?

**And specifically race in relation to law enforcement?**

Of course. People say we need more training on race when we're talking about this, but we are highly conscious about race in this profession. I specifically am, but I think we all are. We recognize that there are quarters of the community that have a real, in some cases, fear, but definitely concern about how they're being policed, what's happening with them, what they're seeing and it's difficult for me, in some ways, only because we're balancing what's happening locally against the national stories and some of them are pretty horrendous. I get out there and say, 'I'm as shocked and dismayed as you are.'

[My daughters] have grown up as two African-American women themselves, knowing a lot of officers and knowing that they're just people with families doing their jobs. They have that perspective. But they also see that stuff that happens and some of it's just wrong. We do have conversations about it. They know I'm not always going to defend something if I don't think it's right. And I'm not going to defend people who criticize if I don't think their criticisms aren't grounded in truth, either.

**What was your reaction when you heard about the Charleena Lyles shooting?**

Well, I was sad, because it was really tragic. I mean, I've been in this job a long time. There are really sad things that happen. I will tell you, I'm not blaming anybody. I think there was a whole set of really complex issues converged at a time and a moment that was very sad and very tragic. And I mean that sincerely. I don't know if people even know but we met with members of her family after, very quietly, no media or anything like that, and it was heartbreaking in many ways. We also talked to the officers who were at the scene and they were pretty shook up too. Nobody walks away from that feeling anything but sad. It's just a tragedy.

At the same time, we're also making sure the things that need to happen are happening internally, in terms of protocol and procedure. All those things need to occur, too. Making sure, *Where's the force investigation team? Are they here? Where are the officers? There. Where's the guild member? There. Who's talking to the family?* All those things need to occur but in the midst of a very sad and tragic time.

**When the Force Review Board came back and said they found the Lyles shooting to be within policy, the backlash was, Well, if this is within policy, then there's something wrong with the policy. How do you respond to that?**

I respond by saying we're always going to look at every incident and try to learn what we can from it. And some of those lessons will involve the police department, some will involve the community, some will involve other organizations. You can't just nail this down to one little thing. There's a whole lot of complexity.

**As a chief, what's the relationship like with your police unions? The Seattle Police Officers Guild [the rank-and-file union], for example, filed an unfair labor practice complaint alleging the city acted improperly by passing police accountability legislation without first negotiating with the union. [The city and Seattle Police Officers Guild have been in contract negotiations for more than three years].**

I have a healthy respect for unions. I've been in a union. At the same time, we have an organization to run. We have to push our agenda forward with our own folks. We actually agree on a lot of things when it comes to a philosophical, high-level: I want officers to have a decent paycheck, to support their family and to be able to be productive members of the conversation and to have rules and regulations that keep them in alignment with what we need to see going forward. I don't think there's a lot of disagreement on that.

When it comes down to policies and those things, they're going to have their perspective. I respect that. I don't always agree with it, but we're going to have to agree to disagree on some of those issues. But I don't ever want to go swinging at the unions and I don't want them swinging at us because, ultimately, I think, in a large way, we do want officers to serve the community. We do want them to have a good working environment. We do want people to feel comfortable talking to them. We just might be going about it differently. On certain things, it may be an outside party that helps us do that.

**Is there a tangible rift there between leadership and, say, rank-and-file, SPOG [Seattle Police Officers Guild]?**

I think rift is much too strong a word. There will be points where we won't agree. There's a lot of points where we do agree. That might sound like a very neutral answer, but that is the actual truth.

### **What's your biggest priority for this year?**

When I came in, I set out the five priorities I saw for the organization. First: Crime and disorder. Our fundamental priority is to minimize crime and disorder in this city.

Then, excellence in service. In terms of public service, let's make sure we do it better than anyone else.

Also, honor and professionalism. Every time you come in uniform, you should feel a sense of *I am doing something honorable*. And if you're a civilian employee, you should feel proud to associate with the police department.

Also, business efficiency. I stole that from Chief O'Toole. How are we going to make sure we're managing our overtime, our maintenance, our vehicles and our equipment and our training? This is taxpayer money so we have to really make sure we're doing things that make sense.

And the last was data-driven policies and practices. Just using technology the best way we can, to help us be more efficient, to do predictive policing, hot spots policing, to find out where repeat calls for service are. Why are we going to a certain place exorbitantly more than we are other places?

### **What happens if you're not appointed as chief? Will you remain in the SPD?**

You know, that's hard to say. That's up to the new chief. Some of it's outside of my control.

Somebody has to step up and take the lead and say, *I want to be the one to make this a better place*. And I think I'm well qualified to do it. I really do. I feel like I've worked really, really hard and I feel super connected to both officers and the community. I just wouldn't be able to feel good about myself if I didn't take this opportunity when it's here.

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