



Staten Island's EMS chief resigns rather than accept transfer

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By

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The borough's EMS chief has put in his retirement papers rather than accept a transfer and a possible demotion, days after he clashed with his FDNY superiors over how to handle a union dispute, the Advance has learned.

Chief Albert Gehres, a 28-year-veteran of the FDNY and, until last Monday, the division commander of Staten Island's two EMS stations and two additional stations in Brooklyn, is slated to retire on Monday.

Gehres' retirement comes after a series of events spurred by an arbitrator's decision last month requiring the FDNY to compensate EMS captains who were required to take on responsibilities above their pay grade and essentially act as chiefs.



Staten Island Advance/Anthony DePrimo

In happier days: Chief Albert Gehres, right, posed with EMS Chief Abdo Nahmod, left, and FDNY Borough Commander Michael Marrone last spring.

But sources close to the chief said he's long been in the crosshairs of supervisors at the FDNY because of his tough approach to management -- when he took the reins of EMS Division 5 in February 2010, he transferred lieutenants and other supervisors in an effort to improve flagging response and in-service times.

"He by far was probably the most unpopular chief in the division for the last 15 years," one source said. "The majority of the enemies that he made were the lieutenants and the captains."

The source added, "The people that didn't like him are the people that didn't do their jobs."

Gehres was given no reason for the transfer, sources said. They noted that he had turned the division around, resulting in the best response time and highest in-service times in the city, as well as the lowest number of disciplinary actions taken against EMS members.

Gehres supported the arbitrators' decision, and in a meeting last week, he argued with EMS Chief Abdo Nahmod over how to handle its aftermath, sources said.

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That, it turned out, was the final straw, sources said -- on Monday, Gehres learned he had been stripped of his command and transferred to the communications division.

FDNY spokesman James Long confirmed the transfer, and Gehres' subsequent retirement, but wouldn't comment on the reason.

His position is being filled by Division Chief Janice Olszewski, a 24-year veteran of the department, Long said.

Sources close to Gehres said the transfer came with the news he'd be demoted to lieutenant, and rather than fight the change and risk ending up with a lower rank's pension, he submitted his papers.

The department had gone as far as issuing him a new set of lieutenant uniforms on Tuesday, sources said.

So contentious was his departure that rumors flew that Gehres was being demoted as a disciplinary measure.

Debra Cali, the head of Gehres' union, said no disciplinary action had been directed against the chief.

And FDNY spokesman Long added: "There is no information regarding demotion or disciplinary actions against Chief Gehres."

Ms. Cali, who's the president of the New York City Emergency Medical Services Superior Officers Association, characterized Gehres as "unhappy" about the transfer.

The next day, she said, she and an attorney accompanied Gehres to a meeting demanding a reason for his reassignment, and were told it was a "restructuring" decision.

"They felt that it was in the department's best interest to move him to another assignment. He was never demoted," she said.

Ms. Cali said he supported the arbitrator's decision, adding that she also supported it, and testified in favor of the captains.

"He came out and supported it. Whether or not this was the precipitating factor, I don't know," she said.

Another FDNY insider said Gehres' outspoken nature often put him at odds with FDNY brass.

"He basically spoke his mind," the insider said, "and when he saw something wrong, he would say it."

Because the ranks of captain and deputy chief on up to division commander aren't considered civil service titles -- meaning the ranks are given by appointment, not after a civil service test -- brass have more leeway in making demotions, sources said.

"If they talk out of line, they get smacked down," the insider said. "There's virtually no protection for them."

Gehres declined comment for this story through an intermediary.