

Report: Fired chief allowed 'boys club mentality' at fire department

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Before they began work early this year, the trainers who were hired to help make the Cincinnati Fire Department a better workplace for women ran into trouble. The problem, they said, was Fire Chief Michael Washington.

According to a summary report from Women Helping Women, the group hired to lead the training, Washington "disrupted" the training schedule, allowing less time for the planning and evaluation that's essential to a successful program.

"The short window did not allow for the intentional process of information gathering," the trainers concluded, in a summary report provided to city officials.

It would not be the last time the group found Washington's leadership lacking.

A 'discriminatory' environment

City Manager Sheryl Long said Women Helping Women's report played a part in her decision Friday to fire Washington after less than two years on the job.

Long said city officials hired the Cincinnati nonprofit, which does advocacy work and provides services to victims of rape and domestic violence, to evaluate the fire department and lead training sessions after a group of women firefighters came to her to complain about how they were being treated.

"I do not tolerate discriminatory, hostile or unfair work environments in any city department," Long said.

But that's the environment Women Helping Women said it found when it began work with fire department employees. The evaluators said in their summary report that many of the problems began at the top.

Washington could not be reached for comment. In a statement, he said he was grateful to have served the city and that his time at the department was "one of my life's most rewarding experiences."

The Women Helping Women report cited Washington as an obstacle to needed change at the fire department. It said trainers encountered resistance from the



Cincinnati Fire Chief Michael Washington points to photos at Engine 5 in Over-the-Rhine during a 2021 visit. ENQUIRER FILE

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summary report from Women Helping Women

chief, who Long said showed an "overall lack of concern about workplace issues related to women."

The group's summary report concluded that female firefighters experienced inappropriate behavior and harassment on the job, and that they did not believe their concerns would be addressed by supervisors.

"Themes also arose addressing the ineffectiveness of the current chain of command reporting structure that creates conditions where complaints and reports

are not properly documented, reviewed, or addressed and where relationships and status determine the outcomes," the summary stated.

The summary, written after several weeks of employee training sessions, found a disconnect between male and female firefighters with regard to harassment and acceptable workplace behavior. In one instance, trainers reported that a male firefighter said he'd never seen any improper behavior on the job. A female firefighter in the same training session, however, said she had personally experienced all manner of discriminatory behavior "short of sexual assault."

No confidence in leadership

According to the summary report, fixing such problems in the fire department was a challenge because "problematic behaviors are modeled by current leadership" and because those behaviors "perpetuate a boys club mentality."

The problems identified by Women Helping Women included harassment, degrading comments, limited promotional opportunities and poor representation of women in leadership.

"Overwhelmingly, from female participants, we heard that their voices are not engaged or present in leadership decisions, including promotional panels, and a sentiment of zero confidence in issues of harassment being adequately addressed by the city," the summary report stated.

Women Helping Women, which the city paid \$108,875 to conduct the training and produce the report, did not recommend personnel changes involving the chief or anyone else, but the group did suggest that "systems and culture change" was necessary to improve the fire department's workplace environment.

Long said she learned in February that former City Manager Paula Boggs Muething had ordered a "climate assessment" two years ago to determine workplace conditions at the fire department, but that assessment never was done.

She said Friday a climate assessment will be done when a new, permanent chief is appointed to replace Washington. She said Women Helping Women also will be asked to do a follow-up report.