

Forced retirement hurts public safety

CHRIS NANCARROW

The local ordinance requiring law enforcement officers to retire at age 60 is likely to be addressed soon. With my grandfather serving as an officer on the Fort Wayne Police Department from 1951 until 1979 and my father from 1973 to the present, one could easily dismiss my perspective as biased. However, the following discussion points should be given fair consideration by those tasked with addressing the issue.

There are several ordinances that have sat on the books over the years without enforcement due to resources and priorities. This lack of enforcement, by itself, doesn't mean that such ordinances should be left to rot without further consideration. A law is a law until some shift in public policy. There is a public policy consideration in keeping qualified officers on the streets, not only for their safety, but for the safety of the public they are sworn to protect. Does a predetermined age threshold determine where mandatory retirement should occur? Such a bright-line rule delineating a particular age is convenient to enforce, but it doesn't necessarily support the ultimate goal of filtering out those no longer qualified to do their job. In fact, such a rule guarantees that those who are presently qualified will be removed at a particular date.

If a pilot can't pass certain medical exams, public policy dictates that he shouldn't be in control of a plane with lives at stake. If a judge is reversed consistently by the appellate court for making "clearly erroneous" decisions, he shouldn't be on the bench. If a police officer fails to qualify with his firearm, can't meet certain physical standards, and/or begins to display a series of questionable judgment calls while on their beat, he should be reassigned or dismissed. Such justified removals should happen in any occupa-

tion, regardless of one's age.

Officers in their 60s, even those who are older, offer several benefits to the department. By this time, they are in some sort of supervisory position on the streets. They are coordinating resources and manpower, doing evaluations, and serving as a mentor to younger officers. They aren't serving on SWAT teams. They have the institutional knowledge of the department and, perhaps more importantly, the street smarts to deal with situations. I've heard personally that the average officer would rather work a scene with a veteran officer than a younger officer who is prone to overreact. Overzealous rookie officers present just as much liability to the department and need the mentorship offered by those more experienced with the situations found on the streets. Even officers with a few decades on the force will seek advice from these more veteran officers.

From my personal knowledge, several of the officers who will be affected by enforcing this mandatory retirement ordinance are officers who haven't lost their ability to chase down and restrain a suspect, use their firearm accurately or make proper judgment calls. In fact, some of these older officers are even in better physical shape than some of the younger officers. We hear the common phrases, 60 is the new 50, 50 is the new 40, and so on. I believe the best way to handle this issue is to remove a threshold age and place an emphasis on skills training and evaluations.

The best officers are those who know when it is time to hang up their uniform and retire on their own initiative without being forced by some ordinance to do so.

Chris Nancarrow is chief deputy clerk of the Allen Circuit and Superior Courts. He wrote this for The Journal Gazette.

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