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Politics

N.J. State Police overhaul promotion process after claims of abuse and favoritism

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By [Christopher Baxter | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

Rick Fuentes

State Police Superintendent Col. Rick Fuentes said Wednesday a new promotion process for troopers was a "somewhat revolutionary" step forward. (John O'Boyle | The Star-Ledger)

TRENTON — In a major shift, the State Police and state Attorney General's Office have implemented a new promotion process that overhauls a roundly criticized system that was almost entirely based on the opinions of supervisors and led to expensive lawsuits alleging favoritism.

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The changes, effective March 1, give troopers a greater understanding of how they can attain a position, and why someone was ultimately chosen for a promotion.

State officials developed the process over the course of more than two years in response to a 2012 report by The Star-Ledger that found the State Police system to be one of the most subjective in the country, costing taxpayers millions of dollars in legal settlements.

Former state Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa convened a panel to study the issue after the report. The new system was drafted by the Attorney General's Office in conjunction with the State Police, the governor's office and the state's three trooper unions.

The result is the most significant change to the system since failed attempts in the 2000s to implement a written exam. State Police Superintendent Col. Rick Fuentes said Wednesday it was a "somewhat revolutionary" step forward for the 94-year-old force.

"The great thing about it, and the thing the unions really value, is that it gives a lot of control to the individual member to help govern their own promotional opportunity," Fuentes said in an interview Wednesday after a budget hearing in Trenton.

Acting state Attorney General John Hoffman also praised the changes.

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"It's a much better process, a much more objective and transparent process, it's a much more accountable process." Hoffman said. also after the hearing. "Troopers

Representatives of the trooper unions could not be reached for comment.

The new process assigns specific point values for everything from evaluations and higher education to military service and commendations, allowing those on the force to know exactly how they can improve their chances of rising through the ranks.

Those seeking a position are grouped into tiers based on their scores, and a commander can select someone from the top tier. The selection must be justified in writing, and that justification will be provided to others in the tier who were not selected.

A minimum of three candidates must be in the top tier, but not more than 10 percent of the number who applied for the position. All troopers will receive a detailed breakdown of their scores, allowing them to see specifically where and how they can improve.

"That goes to the heart of the transparency," Fuentes said.

The effect of misconduct is also more clearly defined as part of the new process, with a standard formula that factors into scoring and weighs the severity of an offense, how long ago it occurred and whether or not there have been other offenses in the interim.

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The changes bring the State Police in line with other statewide forces across the country that use structured interviews, written exams, verbal exams, called oral "boards," or some combination of the three to assess rank-and-file candidates seeking supervisory jobs.

"We're going to still look at that down the road as a possibility of maybe moving toward that, but I think we want to see how this works first and then see if there needs to be tweaks or changes," said Hoffman, who added it would need to be discussed with unions.

Aside from the changes, Fuentes said the State Police was pursuing a deal with the Police Institute at the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice to have faculty provide education on leadership issues. He said he hoped to have the partnership in place this year.

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