

# Mesa interim police chief's goal: Big impact in short time



Jim Walsh, The Republic | azcentral.com

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(Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

After devoting most of his adult life to the Mesa Police Department, interim Police Chief John Meza finally received an opportunity to lead the agency when former Chief Frank Milstead resigned to accept a new post as director of the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

But Meza, who always has been popular with the rank and file after coming up through the ranks, cannot be a candidate to fill the police chief's position on a more permanent basis because he is required to retire in 23 months after reaching 30 years of service.

No matter how short his tenure, Meza said he believes he can make a major impact. The city is planning a nationwide search for a permanent successor to Milstead but has not posted the position as of yet.

In the meantime, Meza's duties will include selecting two assistant police chiefs and three commanders, filling some open positions and setting the tone for the department's leadership.

"What a way to finish my career. I have been with this department over half of my life," Meza said.

He joined the Mesa police as recruit when he was 20 years old, inspired by his brother, who had been a Phoenix officer two years at that time and is now retired. Meza is now 48.

"It's actually a great situation. I truly feel I can lead based on the betterment of the department. I don't have worry about what's best for me," Meza said.

Meza was a finalist for the position in 2010, but was bypassed when Mesa City Manager Chris Brady picked Milstead. He still worked for Milstead for five years and displays no bitterness toward Milstead or George Gascón, Milstead's predecessor.

"I have been blessed to work under George and I am blessed to work under Frank," Meza said.

He said Mesa police still use Gascón's crime-fighting model, which tracks crime trends on a computer program. Commanders meet and propose strategies to reduce crime. Police put a heavy emphasis on targeting career criminals who they believe are responsible for most crime. They also target street-level drug dealing, because they believe drug addicts commit most property crimes to support their habit.

Meza also praised Milstead for his toned-down approach, stressing the importance of the human touch in dealing with employees and crime victims, and in de-escalating potential confrontations with suspects when possible.

"We are a firm but fair organization. We have always valued our community partnerships," he said.

Echoing the approaches of Milstead and Gascón, Meza said law enforcement works best when the police and the public are working together and not in constant conflicts, as has been the case in other parts of the country.

That's not to say Mesa cops will suddenly go soft.

"We need to take care of business. The public expects that, but we need to be fair," Meza said.

Meza said he plans to focus on crime fighting, community engagement and promoting a professional culture within the department.

A former gang detective, Meza has two new community initiatives in the planning stages.

Meza hopes the department can obtain a grant and partner with the Mesa YMCA to operate a Police Athletic League, where officers would hope to have a good influence on disadvantaged youth.

He also said the department plans to review the training of officers in dealing with the mentally ill. He would like at least one officer per shift to be trained in crisis intervention. That officer would act as a police liaison with the Mesa Fire Department's Crisis Intervention Team.

"A lot of these use-of-force scenarios that go bad, it comes down to mental-health issues," Meza said.

He said the debate in major shooting incidents usually turns to some form of gun control and that mental health is often minimized or overlooked.

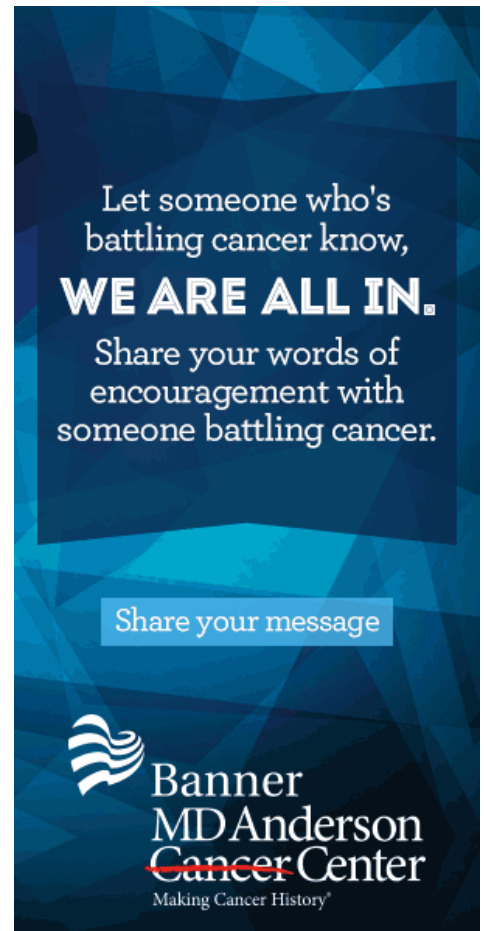
Capt. Forrest Smith, a Fire Department spokesman, said firefighters would welcome more officers trained in recognizing mental-health issues.

He said the Department has two Crisis Intervention Team units, staffed by a firefighter, a paramedic and a behavioral-health specialist, funded through a grant with a private company. The units operate in west and central Mesa from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Meza said he "never thought in a million years" he would end up as interim chief someday and he thanks former Chief Dennis Donna for driving him to Mesa Community College to get him started. He ended up eventually earning a Master's Degree.


"I was just happy being a gang detective," he said.

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