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Park Service Must Fix Flaws, Reinstate Chief Chambers

By RANDALL KENDRICK

The U.S. Park Ranger Lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police was shocked when the National Park Service said it intended to fire Park Police Chief Teresa Chambers [“Move To Fire Chambers ‘Disturbing,’ ” Dec. 22 issue]. We were appalled at the cruel treatment she received during this unwarranted personnel action.

There are two law enforcement components in the park service: the Park Police, the oldest uniformed federal police organization in the country; and the commissioned, or law enforcement, park rangers. The Park Police officers are stationed in Washington, where they provide crowd control for demonstrations and protect the many monuments and parks as well as the people who visit them. The Park Police also has officers on duty in National Park Service areas in New York City and San Francisco. The commissioned park rangers are stationed everywhere else in the National Park Service.

We believe that Chambers has done an outstanding job during her tenure. She is a career law enforcement professional and has years of experience managing law enforcement departments. She was a popular choice when hired and was popular and respected during her tenure.

There have been several significant studies of how law enforcement is managed in the park service. Among them are a 1999 Booz-Allen & Hamilton report; a 2000 report from the International Association of Chiefs of Police; and a 2002 report by Interior Inspector General Earl Devaney, “A Disquieting State of Disorder.” These studies have called for more professionalization in park service law enforcement — that is, ensuring management ranks are filled with law enforcement professionals. The Park Police does have law enforcement professionals from top to bottom, unlike the commissioned park rangers. The reports called for park rangers to adopt this administrative structure, which has served well virtually all government law enforcement departments.

Why, then, is an outstanding professional like Chambers sacked when the leadership of the National Park Service under Director Fran Mainella and her deputy Don Murphy has steadfastly refused to implement professionalization of the entire agency?

Perhaps instead of keeping Chambers as an example of a career professional, the Park Service wanted the status quo.

In the Park Service, the status quo consists of one of the worst safety records for its officers of any agency. The Justice Department studied law enforcement in the federal sector for five years and the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported in 2001: “When only assaults that resulted in death or injury are considered, the National Park Service had a rate of 15 per 1,000, about three times the next highest rate of 5.1 per 1,000 at Customs.” By comparison, the rate at the FBI was 1.2 per 1,000; and at the Drug Enforcement Administration, it was 1.1 per 1,000.

To our organization, it is obvious that top management will not place a priority on officer safety as Chambers tried to do throughout her tenure. Devaney testified in January 2003 before the Senate Finance Committee and said, “Interior’s bureaus are not placing any sense of urgency on law enforcement reforms. . . . Out of 25 recommendations, we only used the word ‘immediate’ once to describe the urgency of a needed reform. This was with regard to our recommendation that staffing shortages which pose a clear safety risk to law enforcement officers be identified — immediately. Over a year has passed since that

recommendation was formally made and, to our knowledge, no serious attempt has been made by the park service to complete this task.”

In our view, Chambers was fired for confirming to a reporter what the inspector general of her department had already made public, both in his testimony and 2002 report.

We demand that Chambers be returned to her job as chief of the Park Police. We also would like to see an increase in the numbers of Park Police officers and the long-called-for increase in commissioned park rangers. Justice will only be served when Teresa Chambers is back in the position where she has proved to be effective and well respected.

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