Hillard just an opening act

Real drama starts as spotlight falls on potential top cop candidates

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Eight years after he retired as Chicago police superintendent, Terry Hillard returned Wednesday to the South Side headquarters to fill in as the department's interim boss, a day after Jody Weis left office.

Now the real drama begins: Who will succeed Weis on a permanent basis?

Hillard, who attended meetings with command staff, told reporters he expects to run the department for about 2 1/2 months before Mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel selects a permanent replacement.

The names of several potential successors were being whispered as crystal-ball gazing began in earnest. But this time comes with the added intrigue of whether Emanuel will follow Mayor Richard Daley and pick an outsider, like Weis, who was a career FBI agent when he took office in early 2006. Emanuel was the only major mayoral candidate not to commit to pick an insider to succeed Weis.

"The names are being thrown around fast and furious," said Ald. Robert Fioretti, 2nd.

But the process to pick the next superintendent has yet to be set.

Interim police Superintendent Terry Hillard's first day back on the job brought immediate questions about who would succeed him.

By city ordinance, the Chicago Police Board recommends three candidates from which the mayor can choose. But Daley passed over the board's choices in 2008 when he hired Weis.

"The timeline will be determined over the next several weeks in conjunction with the mayor-elect's transition team," said board President Demetrius Carnes.

Next week Emanuel is expected to decide who on his transition team will oversee public safety issues and the selection of a new superintendent.

"When the public safety committee is (set) up in the coming days, reviewing candidates will be one of its objectives," said Ben LaBolt, Emanuel's spokesman. "But, of course, we will follow the process that the law lays out."

Emanuel, who made it clear during the election that he would replace Weis, contacted the superintendent on Sunday to ask him to stay until Emanuel is sworn in as mayor May 16.

Daley also had wanted Weis to stay during this interim period, but Weis left office Tuesday, when his contract expired, saying it would be "selfish" to remain while he pursued other career opportunities.

Potential applicants could come from the top ranks, including Assistant Superintendent James Jackson; Deputy Superintendent Ernest Brown; Eugene Williams, a chief; Thomas Byrne, chief of detectives; Nick Roti, chief of the organized crime division; Joe Patterson, a deputy chief in the organized crime division; John Escalante, deputy chief of Area 5; and Al Wysinger, a deputy chief in the detective division.

Other possibilities include former top insiders such as Hiram Grau and Charles Williams, who were finalists for superintendent when Weis was hired, as well as Charles Ramsey, who was a finalist when Hillard was selected in 1998.

Ramsey, who is police commissioner in Philadelphia, said Wednesday that he has not been contacted by Emanuel's transition team.

Another is Michael Shields, a former deputy superintendent who is head of security for Chicago Public Schools and has drawn attention because he is a cousin of first lady Michelle Obama.

Community groups were already watching the process with some saying the next superintendent must continue what they saw as Weis' hard-line message of confronting police wrongdoing.

"The neighborhood needs to feel that the new superintendent is not going to be a protector of police when they are wrong," said the Rev. Michael Pfleger, who had concerns about an insider being hired. "My worry is that you have to make sure that whoever is coming from the system is not going to protect the system."

Weis' outsider status comes with a cost, some say. While hired with a mandate to restore a sense of trust in police after several scandals, he never shook the label "outsider" and his relationship with the union was tense.

"I think that the sense among officers is that he really never made any adaptations to assimilate into the police culture in Chicago," said Arthur Lurigio, a psychology and criminal justice professor at Loyola University Chicago. "He was a highly controlled, highly trained professional. Not to say you don't need that as a superintendent, but you need to connect with people on the visceral level."

Connecting with people is something that Hillard is lauded for, said several police officials who described him as a listener and a professional.

Hillard, 67, said Wednesday that he was stunned to have been asked by the mayor to oversee the transition.

He spent his first day meeting with command staff to get a sense of what, if any, problems they are having, particularly with a hiring freeze that has depleted the ranks. He also intends to tackle deployment plans for the summer, the city's most violent season.