

HART'S AT THE HELM IN SUFFOLK

Its 1st female police commissioner hits the ground running

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Geraldine Hart, the first female police commissioner in Suffolk County's history, officially took the helm on Monday.

Hart, a 21-year-veteran of the FBI, spent her first day as acting commissioner in wall-to-wall meetings, hard at work on her first objective: a top-to-bottom assessment of the department.

"I've already built some strong relationships here with the leadership team so it felt like I was able to hit the ground running this morning," Hart said of her first day.

Hart, the former senior supervisory resident agent in the



Commissioner Geraldine Hart

Long Island office of the FBI, met individually with commanders of the police department's seven precincts for about half-hour each, officials said. The meetings were designed to give Hart a snapshot from the "boots on the ground," she said.

The new acting commissioner also went over the organization chart.

Day two is slated to be more

of the same, with a new round of meetings, this time with the different bureaus and units. Later in the week, Hart is scheduled to visit the marine and aviation bureaus.

Though Hart cited the recently released crime statistics that reflected an overall drop in crime, Suffolk County is still battling MS-13, the vicious transnational street gang responsible for 25 deaths on Long Island in the past two years. Suffolk also continues to struggle with a record-setting opioid crisis, which is estimated to have led to the deaths of more than 400 people in 2017.

"I've had the priorities that I've had which are the same as my predecessor: combating opioids and combating gangs," Hart said, "work that I've been doing throughout my career."

Hart, who joined the FBI in 1996 and moved to the Long Island office in 2014, worked on health care fraud cases and or-

ganized crime. She succeeds Timothy Sini, who was commissioner for about two years before being elected Suffolk County district attorney.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone selected Hart in February and highlighted her long law enforcement career, especially her experience heading the Long Island Gang Task Force, with its concentration on MS-13.

More than 100 candidates were considered for the top job. Applicants included some from Suffolk and Nassau police departments and the NYPD, as well as from law enforcement organizations in other states.

But Bellone chose Hart, a mother of two who lives in Sea Cliff, grew up in Northport and graduated from Northport High School in 1985. Her father was an NYPD officer and influenced her interest in law enforcement.

"I am proud that Geri had

taken the helm of the police department and will use her decades of FBI experience to tackle the issues involving law enforcement in Suffolk County," Bellone said in a statement.

Suffolk Police Chief of Department Stuart Cameron, who became acting commissioner until Hart took over on Monday, said he's worked with Hart for a long time while she was with the FBI and is excited to work with her more closely.

"I have found her to be an individual of exceptional talent and integrity. I look forward to working with her in her new role as Suffolk County Police Commissioner," Cameron said in a statement.

Suffolk County's 2,500-sworn-officer force, with its \$511.2 million budget, is far larger than the 120 agents she oversaw as part of the FBI. Nevertheless, Hart said she's looking forward to the new challenges.

Push to put Northport VA air repairs first

BY MARTIN C. EVANS
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Sen. Chuck Schumer, during a Monday visit to the Northport VA Medical Center, said he wants Washington to fast-track \$15 million in funds to replace failing heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems there and that preserving the troubled 91-year-old facility is vital to the Island's 130,000 veterans.

New York's senior senator said money is available from a \$4 billion energy efficiency fund available to VA facilities nationwide, money included in the federal budget he helped negotiate as Senate minority leader and which President Donald Trump signed into law in February.

"Today, I am demanding the Veterans Administration make this facility their number one priority, and one of the very first

things they should do with that \$4 billion dollars is to send it right here to Northport VA," Schumer said. "Because we have an emergency here, worse than most other places."

Standing with Northport director Scott Guermonprez, Schumer, a Democrat, said urgent action is needed because repeated HVAC system failures at Northport have resulted in months of canceled surgeries, jeopardized the viability of medicines stored at the pharmacy, forced the closure of a homeless shelter, made it impossible to moderate temperatures in many parts of the facility and even resulted in a rat infestation in Building 7. Until recently, Building 7 housed administrative offices of the medical center's nursing department, said a nursing official, who declined to be named.



Sen. Chuck Schumer at the Northport VA Medical Center on Monday, with director Scott Guermonprez.

Curt Cashour, the VA's spokesman in Washington, said VA personnel in its regional and national offices are working with Northport "to secure funding for additional repairs," but did not indicate whether Northport would be prioritized. Cashour denied that rats had entered any of the buildings, saying that a single squirrel had made its way into a building, and that "the issue has since been resolved."

"It's important to note that,

while Northport VAMC has a number of infrastructure challenges that have developed over the years, its ability to serve Veterans well and provide high quality medical care remains unaffected," Cashour said in an emailed statement.

Figures provided by Schumer's office indicated the medical center's main hospital building, which dates to the early 1970s, requires some \$8.5 million to replace air condition-

ing units and crumbling ductwork. One unit requiring replacement provides heating, ventilation and cooling for an area of the main hospital that houses a number of vital services, according to Schumer's office, which said the unit is already 12 years beyond its usable life. Replacing it and repairing related ductwork is expected to cost \$7.5 million. At least five other buildings on the sprawling complex need new heating and cooling units.