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SUFFOLK TOP COP NOMINEE

FRESH FOCUS ON MS-13

Agenda includes sharing
intel with El Salvador,
pushing for more fed funds

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COMMISH PICK

Suffolk's top cop nominee, an FBI veteran, aims to tackle gang with help from El Salvador

BY NICOLE FULLER

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Suffolk Police Commissioner nominee Geraldine Hart said she wants to work closely with authorities in El Salvador to help fight the deadly MS-13 gang's activities in the county and plans to use her knowledge of federal programs to push for more grant money.

Hart, a 21-year veteran of the FBI, was chosen last week by Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone to serve as police commissioner.

She said a January trip she took to El Salvador with a delegation of local authorities, including Richard P. Donoghue, the newly named U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, officers from the Nassau and Suffolk police departments and the State Police, showed the "tremendous opportunities for intelligence sharing and collaboration" with the Central American country where MS-13 reigns.

"That information is key to bring back here to Suffolk County," Hart said in an interview last week. "That's one area that I really want to make sure is open because that intelligence can help us on the ground here. They're very open there to collaboration and working together."

Hart cited a recent comprehensive study on methamphetamine in Wisconsin that drew on criminal intelligence analysis, health care and the prison system — and resulted in a significant federal grant. She said she hoped to emulate the program and use grant money to deal with the county's gang and opioid problems.

Hart has been the senior supervisory resident agent in the Melville office of the FBI and the leader of the Long Island Gang Task Force since 2014, the 33-person team that works to root out MS-13, which authorities say is responsible for at least 25 killings in Nassau and Suffolk counties since 2016.

As authorities worked those



cases, William Sweeney, the assistant director in charge of the FBI's New York field office, said he recalled Hart's diligence and a special concern for the victims' families.

"She's a great leader, passionate about the community and addressing threats in violent crime," Sweeney said. "I just know that when things were breaking in the middle of the night, recovery operations of victims, she was there. Gerri made it a point to meet with victims' families."

New challenges

Despite her long FBI career, during which she has worked on and supervised organized crime, gang and public corruption cases, the commissioner post will present new challenges. Suffolk County's 2,500-sworn-officer force, with its \$511.2 million budget, dwarfs the FBI office of about 120 agents that she oversaw.

Tom Cilmi, the minority leader of the Suffolk Legislature, which will hold a confirmation hearing on Hart's appointment, said he had only met her once briefly.

"Certainly her reported experience in gangs and the opioid crisis is valuable," said Cilmi, (R-Bay Shore). "I also want to speak with her about her administrative experience. Being tapped to take the reins of a large police department, which has seen its share of controversy over the years . . . and quite frankly a huge budget, I'm interested in her ideas."

The Suffolk Police Department hasn't been immune to scandal in recent years: Former Chief of Department James Burke, a Bellone appointee, is serving a 46-month federal prison sentence after pleading guilty to assaulting a handcuffed suspect and conspiring to cover it up. The case also resulted in

federal charges against former Suffolk District Attorney Thomas Spota.

Bellone then tapped Timothy Sini, who ran the department for the past two years before beginning an elected term as district attorney in January.

Bellone said he's confident Hart, who would be the first female police commissioner in Suffolk in its 58-year history, will be confirmed.

"My belief is that when they [legislators] go through that process they're going to be really impressed with this individual, and her record of accomplishment, her record of working with the Suffolk County Police Department, on some of the toughest issues we face around gangs and drugs and they will agree that she's the right choice," Bellone said.

While Hart, who repeatedly praised Sini and said she would "build on" the "progress" made during his tenure, is a new face to many Suffolk residents, she's well-known in law enforcement circles on the Island.

State Police Maj. David Candelaria, commander of Long Island's Troop L in Farmingdale, said he was struck by Hart's eagerness to engage with the State Police when she first arrived on the Island, involving the agency in multistate human and drug trafficking cases.

"Instead of, 'we're just going to do this ourselves,' she was always about partnerships," said Candelaria. "She was always about cooperation, she wanted everyone to get together and work for common goals."

Last month, a captain from Candelaria's troop accompanied Hart to El Salvador — at her invitation — to witness firsthand the region's fight against MS-13.

"It was a great opportunity to get some real-time MS-13 intelligence, what's really going on in El Salvador, which is the epicenter of MS-13," said Candelaria.

Hart said engaging with the community — where she is less well-known — will be a big part of her efforts as she transitions



If confirmed, Geraldine Hart, right, with the Fourth Precinct's Officer

from the FBI to the department by mid-April.

Bruce Morrison, president of the Selden Civic Association, said he works closely with the COPE, or Community Oriented Police Enforcement, officers in the Sixth Precinct, and hopes Hart has plans to work on the opioid crisis.

"We have a lot of people who are parents and grandparents and that's all we talk about," said Morrison. "I would love to hear what she plans to do and if we can help in anyway."

Legis. Monica Martinez, chairwoman of the legislature's Public Safety Committee, said she met

Hart at the 2017 National Night Out event in Brentwood, meant to foster stronger relationships between police and communities. Martinez said while her "qualifications definitely speak for themselves," she wants to ask her about her views on a number of issues, including police interactions with the immigrant community.

"I also need to make sure our families are being treated with respect," said Martinez (D-Brentwood). "I know that the police department has done a lot to get those relationships where there is trust, which is so important in combating not just our gang is-

TARGETS MS-13



Angela Daly, will become Suffolk's first female police commissioner. ■ Video: [newsday.com/suffolk](https://www.newsday.com/suffolk)

sues, but any public safety issue."

Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga), a retired Suffolk police detective, said he thinks Hart will do "a fine job" as commissioner.

"But I believe the police union contract will have a negative effect on her ability to properly manage the finances of the department," Trotta said. "She's going to be in the shock of her life when she starts knowing the nuances of that police contract," referring to work rules that can restrict officer assignments.

Hart said she is looking forward to the challenge. "It's a relationship that I'll get to know as it

evolves," she said of working with union bosses.

Patrick Ryder, Nassau County's acting police commissioner, whose own confirmation hearing is set for Monday, said he worked with Hart on gang and other issues and predicted she'd be a quick study. Ryder said being a commissioner is not just about fighting crime but also dealing with all aspects of the department, from unions to balancing a budget — everything from replacing aging police cars to getting new uniforms.

Ryder said he's been impressed by Hart's style — as he

described, lacking in ego and strong on substance — in dealing with local authorities during multi-agency investigations. "She fostered relationships. She thrived on working with other agencies."

Hart, 50, a divorced 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.

"He always taught me humility, and bravery and just perseverance, really," she said. "So just seeing him in action doing that, more than just words, really

“Instead of, ‘we’re just going to do this ourselves,’ she was always about partnerships. She was always about cooperation, she wanted everyone to get together and work for common goals.”

— State Police Maj. David Candelaria, commander of Long Island's Troop L in Farmingdale

prompted me to want to enter public service."

A fifth-grade field trip to FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., steered her to the FBI.

"Over the years, he would kind of give me the New York City perspective on an FBI agent," Hart said of her father.

Was it the stereotype of the FBI coming in and big footing local cops on investigations? "In sum and substance," Hart said, laughing.

She graduated from St. Francis College in Loretto, Pennsylvania, in 1989 and before entering law school, worked at a law firm in Washington as a paralegal. She got her law degree from St. John's University School of Law in 1995, but practiced for only six weeks.

Led organized crime probe

Hart started with the bureau in 1996 working in Manhattan on health care fraud cases. And in an unusual twist for a young agent, her first case was a homicide: A Brooklyn mother and son were charged with fatally shooting the woman's former lover — a doctor and lawyer — in a Mineola parking lot to prevent him from informing on alleged Medicaid fraud.

The two were convicted in 1999, she said.

Hart moved to the bureau's organized crime squad in Queens that same year, and worked on investigations into the Lucchese crime family, and later led a joint FBI-NYPD task force investigating the Genovese, Colombo and Bonanno families.

Hart said as she transitions from the FBI, which she plans to retire from by the end of March, she'll meet with the police brass to figure out where the department stands. Hart said acting Suffolk Police Commissioner Stuart

Cameron, a 33-year-department veteran, who will serve as the top-uniformed member of the department, was one of the department leaders that she communicated with during the Burke years, when the former chief shut down formal relations between the police department and federal agencies.

"He enjoys a stellar reputation inside and outside the department," Hart said. "The leadership team that's in place is second to none so I feel that that's an extreme benefit for me, to come into that and have them by my side. I think that's a tremendous asset for me."

The police commissioner salary is \$171,007, according to county officials. Hart said she didn't know her exact FBI salary, but said it was somewhere around \$145,000 to \$150,000. Since she's 50 and has 20 years of service, she'll collect her federal pension in addition to her commissioner salary, if confirmed.

Steven Troyd, who worked as an FBI agent on violent crime under Hart, said police officers in Suffolk County are getting a "good boss." Troyd recalled she was the kind of leader who trusted her agents — letting him "run with it" on a series of child prostitution cases — that ended with the perpetrators getting "some serious time."

"I think this is the best thing that's happened to Suffolk in a long time, after the Jimmy Burke thing, and the Spota thing, it kind of brings a blemish to the whole department," said Troyd, a retired FBI supervisor who's now the public safety director for the Town of Southampton. "She's a really straight arrow, hardworking. She's really going to impress the guys there."

JAMES CARBONE