

# MIAMI BEACH

## COMMITTEE MEMORANDUM

TO: Public Safety and Neighborhood Quality of Life Committee Members

FROM: Eric Carpenter, City Manager

DATE: May 14, 2025

TITLE: DISCUSS THE POLICE DEPARTMENT'S MINIMUM AGE AND EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE HIRING OF CERTIFIED POLICE OFFICERS AND POLICE OFFICER TRAINEES.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Administration recommends that the Mayor and City Commission consider maintaining the existing established minimum hiring standards for police recruits. Based on the unique work environment in Miami Beach, the Department requires highly capable and qualified police officers to successfully carry out the mission of the Police Department.

### **BACKGROUND/HISTORY**

At the February 26, 2025, City Commission Meeting, at the request of Commissioner Alex Fernandez and subsequently co-sponsored by Commissioners David Suarez, Joseph Magazine, and Tanya Bhatt, the Mayor and City Commission approved a referral (C4 T) to the Public Safety and Neighborhood Quality of Life Committee ("PSNQLC") to discuss the Police Department's minimum age and educational requirements for the hiring of certified police officers and police officer trainees.

### **ANALYSIS**

The Administration prides itself in historically attracting applicants for its Police Department officer positions from a highly qualified and diverse pool of potential candidates. Based on widely accepted research in the field of law enforcement, in 2015 the Miami Beach Police Department (MBPD) heeded the national call for advancement in the police profession by requiring, among other things, that applicants meet age and academic criteria. In 2021, the Department added an additional track in the interest of increasing the candidate pool by allowing applicants to be at least 25 years of age without additional requirements.

Understanding the need to be flexible and to further increase the police candidate pool and quality of candidates, the Administration appeared before the Personnel Board on July 10, 2024 for ratification of additional tracks. The Miami Beach Fraternal Order of Police also attended additional meetings to present their position on age and academic requirements. Ultimately, the amendments adopted included requiring applicants to be 23 years of age with three (3) years of continuous or progressive work experience to apply. Furthermore, certified officers who are at least 23 years of age with two (2) full time years of satisfactory experience as a police officer in another jurisdiction now also meet the new minimum requirements for Certified Police Officer, as shown below.

	<u>2015</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2024</u>
<b>Certified Officer</b> <i>(completed State of Florida Basic Law Enforcement / Correctional Certification requirements)</i>	Be at least 21 years of age with: <i>(raised from 19 years of age)</i>  • a bachelor's degree; OR • three (3) years of active military service (with an Honorable Discharge);		Be at least 21 years of age with:  • a bachelor's degree; OR • three (3) years of active military service (with an Honorable Discharge); OR • 60 college credits and three (3) years of full-time Florida law enforcement experience.	Be at least 21 years of age with:  • a bachelor's degree; OR • three (3) years of active military service (with an Honorable Discharge); OR • 60 college credits and three (3) years of full-time Florida law enforcement experience  OR Be at least 25 years of age with no additional experience (education/military service/ Florida law enforcement) required.	Be at least 21 years of age with:  • a bachelor's degree; OR • three (3) years of active military service (with an Honorable Discharge); OR • two (2) years of verifiable, satisfactory police service  OR Be at least 23 years of age with three (3) years of verifiable, satisfactory, continuous and/or progressive employment.
<b>Non-Certified Officer</b>	Be at least 21 years of age with: <i>(raised from 19 years of age)</i>  • a bachelor's degree;		Be at least 21 years of age with:  • a bachelor's degree; OR • three (3) years of active military service (with an Honorable Discharge)		Be at least 21 years of age with:  • a bachelor's degree; OR • three (3) years of active military service (with an Honorable Discharge);  OR Be at least 23 years of age with three (3) years of verifiable, satisfactory, continuous and/or progressive employment.

The Police Department has been actively seeking and successfully building more avenues of recruitment for 21<sup>st</sup> century policing through innovative recruitment videos and tools, increasing college and university activations, pursuing more female candidates, exploring new social media ventures, and enhancing its training facilities and venues, among other benefit enhancements and initiatives.

Looking at regional 2024 data, the Miami Beach Police Department, while growing its ranks over the past three (3) years, has a vacancy rate far below that of similar departments. Over the past few years, even with a higher number of retirements, the vacancy rate has continued to decrease from 6.9% in the past few years to its current rate of 3.9% due to the aggressiveness of the Department's hiring campaign. The Department is forecasted to be on par with the 437 budgeted positions by October of 2025. Similar agencies like the North Miami Beach Police Department, who has a minimum age requirement of 19 and no degree requirement, and the Coral Gables Police Department, where an associate degree is required, hold higher vacancy rates at 11% and 14% respectively.

All things being equal, while reducing the age and/or education requirement may indeed increase the number of applications, such measures do not inherently lead to higher rates of successful hiring or improved applicant quality. In fact, empirical research in recent years consistently indicates that the most influential factor in attracting qualified candidates is a competitive starting salary. The Department's declining vacancy rate is the direct result of a deliberate, strategic and multifaceted approach implemented in response to an aging workforce and evolving national trends in law enforcement recruitment.

In particular, the Department has prioritized offering competitive compensation packages, including attractive starting salaries and hiring bonuses. Concurrently, it has engaged in aggressive and targeted recruitment campaigns, streamlined the background investigation process to improve efficiency, enhanced its outreach through social media platforms, and adopted more rigorous candidate selection criteria. Anecdotally, the Department has raised employment standards by emphasizing candidates with stable and progressive work histories, including prior military or law enforcement experience. This shift has produced a candidate pool that is more qualified and more likely to remain with the Department long-term. These efforts have led to a more substantial, more committed applicant pool, reduced turnover, and a projected near-zero vacancy rate.

Prior to 2005, MBPD required a college degree for officers, a requirement which was dropped to save money and ultimately ensued a decade of challenging years for the Department. Over the past decade, since the strengthening of both academic and age standards for police officers, a clear shift in the department culture and level of service has been experienced. This positive shift is backed heavily by research.

Soft skills (interpersonal, communication and personal attributes which enable individuals to interact effectively with others) play a crucial role in law enforcement. Obtaining a college education has been shown to be essential in the development of these skills, to include communication during investigations and interacting with the public, adaptability in making sound decisions on one's feet in an emergency, and problem-solving.

The *2015 President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing Recommendations: From Print to Action* recommended community and problem-oriented policing strategies as ways to strengthen police-community relations and better respond to crime and other social problems. When police departments use community-policing strategies, communities are more satisfied with how police serve the public, ultimately viewing them as more legitimate. Among street-level officers who have the most interaction with the public, having a bachelor's degree significantly increases commitment to community policing. Officers with higher education tend to work more proactively with community members to resolve issues and prevent problems rather than only reacting to incidents when called. Additional areas highlighted in this research include:

- *critical thinking* – officers who understand scientific methods, as taught in college, are better positioned to adjust their department's policies
- *emotional intelligence* – providing additional years and knowledge helps officer learn how to manage their emotions and reactions so that when they face potentially dangerous situations, they can stay focused and make decisions that will keep themselves, their partners, bystanders, and perpetrators safe and legally protected
- *creativity* – finding unique solutions to challenges helps officers adapt to evolving situations and enhance overall public safety
- *teamwork* – collaboration is integral, and officers must work seamlessly coordinating efforts during complex situations, sharing information, and relying on each other to achieve common goals with their teams to maintain public safety
- *technical skills enhancement* – higher education sharpens officers' writing skills, statistical analysis and ability to interpret data, basic legal system knowledge, managerial skills, leadership skills, cultural awareness and perspective development

Officers with graduate degrees are twice as likely to be familiar with evidenced-based policing, which uses research to guide effective policy and practice. Educated law enforcement professionals will be better equipped to lead much-needed reform efforts.

Police officers with at least some college experience have been shown to be more focused on promotion and expect to retire at a higher rank compared to officers without formal education. Police administrators/chiefs are more likely to hold college and post-graduate degrees.

Empirical evidence also establishes a strong correlation between formal higher education and reductions in violence, the use of force, and other forms of misconduct. Specific findings include:

- *use of force* – officers possessing a college degree are approximately 40% less likely to engage in the use of force, defined broadly to include verbal threats and physical actions capable of causing harm.

- *firearm discharge* – college-educated officers are nearly 30% less likely to discharge their firearms in the line of duty.
- *officer assaults* – data from agencies that require a college degree indicate lower rates of officers being assaulted by members of the public.
- *citizen complaints* – research shows that a small percentage of officers are responsible for the majority of citizen complaints, and officers with at least a two-year degree are approximately 50% less likely to fall within this high-complaint group.
- *termination for misconduct* – officers with a minimum of an associate degree are 40% less likely to be terminated due to misconduct.

These findings provide a compelling, evidence-based rationale for maintaining and strengthening educational requirements in the recruitment and advancement of law enforcement personnel. In Miami Beach since 2015, claims against Miami Beach police officers for excessive force and false arrests have dropped.

While comparisons between the Department’s hiring requirements and vacancy rates and those of neighboring jurisdictions may offer limited contextual insight, such comparisons may also be misleading. Although geographically compact and with an estimated permanent population of approximately 82,000, the City of Miami Beach is a major international tourism hub, attracting over 13 million visitors annually. On a daily basis, the city's population effectively increases to over 200,000, with figures rising to between 350,000 and 500,000 during high-impact events and holiday periods.

In its continued commitment to excellence in public service, the Administration seeks to recruit individuals who demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills, integrity, and a sustained commitment to both personal and professional development. Given the elevated expectations placed upon law enforcement officers to serve as role models and uphold public trust, the Department maintains rigorous hiring standards designed to attract and retain highly qualified personnel. These standards have been strategically adjusted to remain competitive in the labor market without compromising the Department’s core values or public safety mission.

## **FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

According to a 2022 investigation conducted by *The Washington Post*, the 25 largest police departments in the United States expended over \$3.2 billion in the preceding decade to resolve civil claims, with approximately \$1.5 billion attributable to cases involving officers with multiple documented allegations of misconduct. The most financially significant categories of claims were those alleging excessive use of force and false arrest, totaling \$71.9 million and \$51.1 million, respectively.

Notably, in 2024, the City of Chicago allocated approximately \$107.5 million to settle police misconduct lawsuits, while the City of New York incurred over \$205 million in related expenditures. These figures represent only the direct litigation costs and do not account for ancillary consequences, such as diminished community trust, operational disruptions due to officer suspensions, or the additional staffing resources required to manage and litigate such cases.

While precise financial data regarding the City’s litigation-related expenditures may be difficult to quantify, existing evidence — particularly from major metropolitan areas — demonstrates a clear and significant correlation between officer conduct and associated legal costs. Given the unique characteristics of the City of Miami Beach, including its high population density during events and tourism activity, the City faces public safety challenges comparable to those of larger urban centers.

Accordingly, the recruitment and selection of exceptionally qualified, professional law enforcement personnel is a critical factor in mitigating potential litigation exposure and fostering community trust. Strategic investment in officer quality directly supports both risk reduction and the long-term sustainability of effective public safety services.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Miami Beach Police Department needs officers with high emotional intelligence and strong communication skills. Officers who are quick thinkers and adjust well to new directives are those who the Department values most as candidates. Given the enhanced expectations placed on law enforcement personnel in the City of Miami Beach, officers must consistently perform under increased public visibility and operational complexity. As a result, the Department places greater emphasis on the possession of soft skills, such as communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and conflict resolution, than may be required in jurisdictions where officers are not subject to the same degree or nature of daily challenges and public scrutiny.

In working with the Personnel Board, the Department has also successfully taken the first steps in creating an appropriate yet more flexible application process to become an officer. Through amending several requirements for applicants, the Department has produced the potential for an increased police candidate pool. Ultimately, by maintaining high expectations for future officer recruits, the City of Miami Beach will continue to emerge as a prosperous city led by a department that prioritizes high quality candidates.

### **Applicable Area**

Citywide

**Is this a “Residents Right to Know” item, pursuant to City Code Section 2-17?**

No

**Is this item related to a G.O. Bond Project?**

No

**Was this Agenda Item initially requested by a lobbyist which, as defined in Code Sec. 2-481, includes a principal engaged in lobbying?** No

If so, specify the name of lobbyist(s) and principal(s):

### **Department**

Police/Human Resources

### **Sponsor(s)**

Commissioner Alex Fernandez

### **Co-sponsor(s)**

### **Condensed Title**

Police Officer/Trainee Hiring Requirements