

Get Rid of the Old Guys?

Do our senior cops deserve the boot?

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They denied my request for an extension. That was my friend's lament concerning his impending mandatory retirement. Bob has been in law enforcement all his life, beginning in his early twenties as a cop, and later becoming an FBI Agent. He'd worked his way up through the ranks, eventually reaching the position of Assistant Special Agent In Charge of a large office on the east coast. A former SWAT guy who still works out regularly, Bob is a man who takes his vocation seriously - always hands on - never allowing himself to become the type of administrator that many of us loathe: the desk-bound "Do as I say guy"; the guy who "talks the talk, but never walks the walk."

Bob's situation isn't unique. Federal law enforcement and corrections officers are mandated by law to retire at age 57. The verbiage associated with the U.S. Code that defines the law is as follows:

To maintain a young and vigorous workforce in physically arduous Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) positions, it is the policy of the Department of Justice, to employ persons who are physically capable of meeting the rigorous demands of law enforcement activities.

It seems odd to me that one's age would enter into the decision to force someone from his or her career. I've seen "young" cops who are obese, out of shape, apathetic, and otherwise poor representatives for LEOs, yet we don't get rid of them. How is it equitable to require a person to retire, who is still in shape, mentally sharp, tactically sound, and enthusiastic about doing his job each day?

One of the many vivid impressions from my early Chicago cop days in the 70s, was working with a guy who was 53 years old. Tom had snow on the roof, but fire in the furnace. He worked out every day, running in combat boots and using homemade weights to maintain his strength. When we jumped out of our car to chase after a thug, Tom not only hung with me, but also fought to be the first to get hands-on with the cretin to subdue and cuff him. When I found out how old Tom was, I was amazed. That man put many of us young cops to shame. Five years later, when I transferred out of that District to a specialized unit, Tom was still battling cave dwellers every day - and winning.

According to testimony on 9/9/04, by Jagadeesh Gokhale, Senior Fellow from The Cato Institute, before the Senate Special Committee on Aging, the decision to retire should be made voluntarily. Gokhale quoted some existing retirement guidelines:

...State and local police (55-60), firefighters (55-60); federal firefighters (57); federal law enforcement and corrections officers (57); air traffic controllers (56, if hired after 1972); and commercial airline pilots (60). These are "earlier-than-normal" retirement ages compared to the vast majority of other occupations.

He went on to say conditions are different today, particularly, regarding the baby boomer phenomenon, in which many folks will be reaching retirement age around the same time. Therefore, changes must be made to amend these arbitrary guidelines. Moreover, some of the mandatory retirement ages are in

violation of the anti-age-discrimination laws that were passed in the 1960s.

Another dynamic that has changed is how long we live. In the U.S., life expectancy is now seventy-eight years of age. Forcing someone to retire at age fifty-five means that a retiree is potentially looking at 25 years or more of reduced income and activity. Gokhale said:

...health and longevity of the U.S population generally has been improving. This may mean that jobs that could not be conducted effectively by workers after their late fifties, now can be. A historical comparison of mortality rates suggests that those aged in their early sixties today are as healthy as were those in their mid fifties a few decades ago - when the mandatory retirement age rules were first imposed in the occupations under consideration.

Gokhale further points out that technology has altered the way that LE performs. Years ago, there were many walking beats and fewer cops, which meant less help, and therefore, more battles. Increased technology also means tools like scooters, the Segway and Tasers; things that reduce the amount of physical work required to do the job.

The general attitude concerning health and fitness in LE has changed, for the better. There's an emphasis on being in shape, and cost analyses bear out the advantages of a force that is healthy and fit, in terms of tangibles, i.e., fewer work days lost to illness and injury. Many agencies/departments have also implemented incentives for those employees who pass yearly PT tests.

One thing that can't be measured is the loss of experience when older workers are let out to pasture. A street-smart cop who's been on the job for 25 years is a walking reference book for the newbie. A seasoned veteran who can pass on to rookies street survival tips that can't be found in any text book is a priceless commodity. Furthermore, an investigator who's handled complex cases over the years, cases he's taken from incident to arrest, to indictment, and eventually through trial, has institutional knowledge that takes years for someone to accumulate. To allow these jewels to be put on the shelf is unconscionable.

My hope is that the tide of resentment toward forced retirement will rise in favor of relaxing the standards. Old-timers, and that includes guys and gals, are an asset to LE, not a liability. If your department is still mired in the muck of archaic retirement policies, raise your voice and make some noise to get them changed. We've already lost too many good cops because of ill-informed legislators passing laws that make no sense, and, who by the way, haven't seen any reason to make their own jobs subject to mandatory retirement.

So do we get rid of the old guys? Heck no, we embrace them, warmly, and revere them for leadership and contributions. Stay Safe, brothers and sisters!

Web Links:

- [U.S. Department of Justice](#)
- [The Cato Institute](#)
- [LivSafe--Stay Aware, Stay Safe!](#)
- [Chicago Warriors Midnight Battles in the Windy City by John Wills](#)
- [Gripped By Fear by John Wills](#)

John M. Wills spent 33 years in law enforcement as a Chicago Police Officer and FBI Special Agent (Ret). He is a Freelance Writer and Speaker whose first book, *Chicago Warriors Midnight Battles in the Windy City*, is now available online at Amazon and Barnes & Noble. His second book, *Gripped by Fear* is available through Total Recall Press. Contact John through his website: www.johnmwills.com.

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