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### **Veteran Oak Park Firefighter Named New Chief**

A veteran of nearly 25 years with the Oak Park Fire Department has been named its new chief. William M. Bell, who served as Deputy Chief of Operations, will take over from retiring Chief Gerald Beeson effective immediately.

“The selection of Bill Bell is a tribute to the professionalism of our fire department,” said Village Manager Carl Swenson. “We conducted an open search to find the most qualified candidate. It was gratifying in the end to discover that the best candidates were right here. This selection speaks volumes about the quality of the personnel in our fire department who have dedicated their lives to helping others.”

The search for a new chief began shortly after Beeson announced in July his intent to retire at the end of the year. More than 30 qualified candidates initially applied. The field was later refined to 17 candidates from 11 states. Six of the candidates were invited to participate in a three-day selection process, November 30, December 1 and December 2 at Village Hall. All six candidates were interviewed separately by two panels of senior Village executives on December 1 and the three finalists invited to a follow-up interview on December 2.

“Throughout the selection process Bill Bell demonstrated that he was the ideal candidate,” Swenson said. “Not only did he have the experience and the expertise, but he also offered the added benefits of having played a major role in building the fire department we have today. He knows the department and he knows the Village. He was a perfect fit for the job.”

A native Oak Parker who attended Longfellow School and Oak Park-River Forest High School, Bell characterized his selection as chief a “career dream come true.”

“When you reach the point in your career as a firefighter where you decide that you want to be a leader, chief becomes the ultimate goal,” he said. “To become chief of the department where you have spent your entire career is immensely rewarding. I am excited and ready to go. We have a great department and I am honored to have the opportunity to lead such an incredible group of individuals and work in a community that appreciates our work and dedication to the job.”

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Bell joined the Oak Park Fire Department as a firefighter in April 1980 after serving as a military policeman in the Marine Corps. He rose through the ranks to hold numerous positions within the department, including paramedic, fire investigator, inspector, lieutenant, training officer, shift commander, battalion chief and, most recently, deputy chief of operations.

He has played roles in many of the decisions that helped the department make the transition from traditional firefighting to emergency medical services that have become an increasingly more important function of fire departments nationwide. He also was instrumental in the purchase of new fire fighting and emergency services equipment, and training programs that have earned the Oak Park Fire Department national accreditations for readiness.

A key architect of department's growing regional role, Bell helped initiate the area's Mutual Assistance Box Alarm System (MABAS) special rescue team, serving as its first coordinator, and developing its policies, procedures and training programs. He also has been instrumental in developing the tools and training programs necessary to prepare personnel to deal with hazardous materials incidents and both natural and manmade disasters.

An advocate of bringing diversity to the firefighting/emergency services industry, a research paper he authored to create the department's female firefighter pregnancy/maternity policy has been placed in the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center.

Bell earned an accounting degree from Rosary College and is pursuing a master's degree in public administration from DePaul University. He also is enrolled in the U.S. Fire Administration's National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program and holds numerous certifications in a wide range of fire and emergency services categories.

The role of fire fighter has evolved beyond the traditional one of putting out fires, according to Bell, an evolution that has changed how departments train and their equipment. Today, nearly two-thirds of emergency calls relate to providing medical services, he said, a trend that requires personnel to possess greater skills and be involved in more sophisticated training. The number of certified paramedics at the Oak Park Fire Department has more than doubled over the past 10 years, to about 75 percent of sworn personnel.