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TOP STORY

New WKU police chief plans changes

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Sep 15, 2017

Mitch Walker, chief of Western Kentucky University's Police Department, stands Thursday on campus.

Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com

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Western Kentucky University's new police chief will roll out changes for the department, including a renewed focus on officers building more relationships while on patrol and a push to hire more officers and dispatchers.

“We’ll be more approachable,” said Mitch Walker, who was named WKU’s police chief Wednesday.

Walker has served as the police department’s interim chief since August 2016. He has more than 26 years of law enforcement experience, including five years at WKU, 16 at the Bowling Green Police Department and six at the Burkesville Police Department in Cumberland County.

A committee’s national search attracted 46 applicants and resulted in three finalists. Brian Kuster, WKU’s vice president of student affairs, chose from three finalists after the committee reviewed the candidates. The two other finalists were Furman University Police Department Chief Tom Saccenti and Jim Hyde, a retired Bowling Green Police Department assistant police chief.

“I do feel like we had some very good finalists,” Kuster said, but Walker stood out to him. “He had a great understanding of what we needed.”

Kuster said WKU is interested in having its police department do more community-focused policing that gets patrol officers out of their cars and into the campus community.

The shift in focus follows a consultant’s review last year that concluded the department was plagued by low morale and staffing, and policy issues that required a “new direction” for the department.

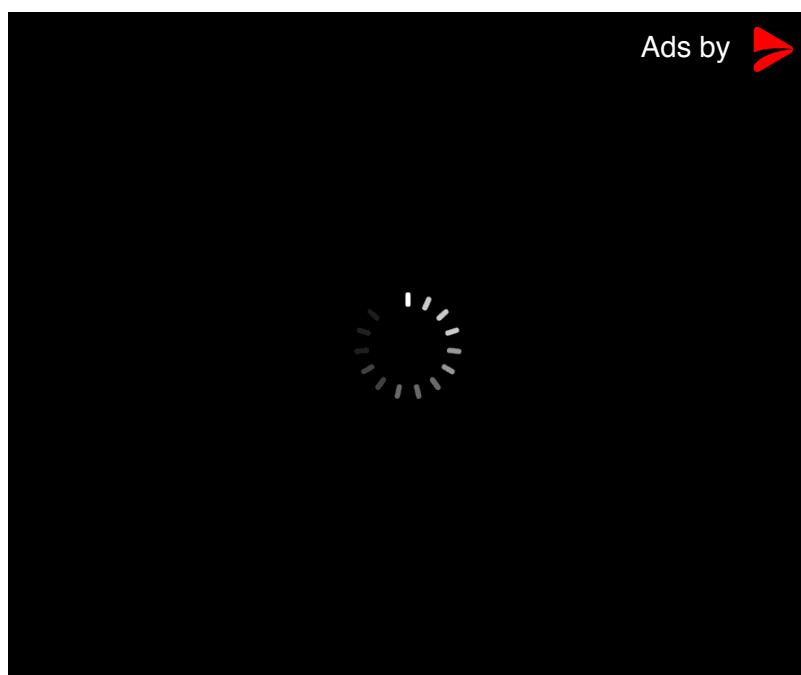
WKU also experienced several racial incidents last year, including an African-American student who had her vehicle vandalized with a racial epithet.

In light of those incidents, Walker said the department has worked to improve how efficiently it responds. Walker also said the department will undergo diversity training.

As an African-American, Walker said he can relate to people who experience prejudice and discrimination.

As a BGPD officer, Walker remembers a child custody issue involving an African-American grandparent unwilling to give up a child because she didn't trust the officers.

“She gave me the child,” Walker said.



Walker wants to bring that kind of understanding between police and community members to WKU.

“I’d like to organize a chief’s advisory team,” he said, describing it as a team made of students, faculty and staff. “I could get advice from them on campus safety issues.”

Walker said those community relationship efforts would extend to talking with students in WKU’s Student Government Association, fraternities and other campus groups. One change already in place is assigning police officers to specific dorms, Walker said.

“They are to get to know all the staff, get to know the students,” he said.

Walker said he’d also like to expand the department by filling openings for two new police officers and two dispatchers.

Kuster said he’s aware the department has challenges to overcome but said Walker is a good leader and is “very authentic.”

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

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