

City's minority recruiter doesn't live here

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The man leading the city of Springfield's effort to recruit minority applicants for the police and fire departments lives 285 miles away in Wisconsin.

L. Christopher "Chris" Miller, previously an administrator at the University of Illinois at Springfield, left Illinois last year to become vice president for student affairs at Marquette University in Milwaukee. His appointment was announced in May and took effect July 15.

But Miller is still being paid by Springfield, much to the surprise of several aldermen and the executive director of Springfield's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"I'm sure there's got to be somebody locally to do it," said Ward 2 Ald. Gail Simpson.

"That is utterly amazing," said Ward 9 Ald. Steven Dove. "I think it's extremely shortsighted and irresponsible. ... How can you do your job and not be somewhat tied to what's going on in the community?"

Miller's one-year, \$10,000 contract went into effect Nov. 1, six months after he accepted the job at Marquette. Expenses less than \$15,000 don't require approval by the city council.

Jim Donelan, executive assistant to Mayor Tim Davlin, said he and Davlin believe the city is lucky that Miller asked to stay on another year. This year, recruitment testing will be conducted for both the police and fire departments.

"Even though Dr. Miller is working at Marquette University, he still has a home here in Springfield and still spends a considerable amount of time in Springfield," Donelan said.

Miller also has a team of people helping him locally, Donelan said. It's a "pretty good deal, as far as the cost," Donelan said.

"We're fortunate to have that arrangement," Donelan said. "I think it's near and dear to his heart to help the city reach its goal of hiring more and more minorities candidates in the police and fire departments."

Asked if there was no one else in Springfield that could do the work, Donelan said: "We're happy to continue to work with Chris Miller."

When he was hired in 2006, Miller said, the "actual minority pool was so low that we weren't really able to effectively convert those potential applicants into successful applicants."

His efforts have helped increase the pool of minority candidates from 9.7 percent in 2005 to 21.9 percent in 2008.

The improved numbers, however, have not resulted in substantive minority hires so far.

The Springfield Police Department's minority makeup is 5.8 percent, roughly the same level it's been at for years. Minorities make up about 1 percent of the Springfield Fire Department.

Miller said a more diverse candidate pool will eventually translate into good quality candidates.

"I think this kind of intense recruitment and engagement will net itself some significant kind of results," he said.

Asked how he could do his job from Wisconsin, Miller said: "The infrastructure that we have in place works great."

He said he subcontracts with faculty members at UIS and other consultants to conduct testing workshops and seminars in Springfield. Miller said he has assembled a database of 468 potential minority applicants, and his team makes no less than 21 contacts with each applicant each year.

Miller was in Springfield last weekend for orientation and practice written exams for patrol officers. He pays for his own expenses, including travel and cell phone, according to the contract.

"It's hard to argue with the success of the efforts," Miller said.

Archie Lawrence, president of the Springfield's NAACP, said he didn't realize Miller was still leading the city's minority recruitment efforts. He said he figured Miller would be replaced when he left UIS.

"I think since he's taken another position as vice president, I imagine his time that he would devote to this would probably be hampered somewhat, if for no other reason than he is in Milwaukee."

Lawrence said his organization believes the city should have a full-time minority recruiter. He referred to increasing the diversity of local police and fire departments as a "never-ending fight."

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Minority/gender breakdown in police, fire departments

Springfield Police Department

275 total sworn officers

2 Black females

30 White females

1 Asian male

11 Black males

2 Hispanic males

229 White males

Springfield Fire Department

221 total non-civilians

2 Black males

1 Hispanic male

5 White females

213 White males

Source: City of Springfield

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