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Out-of-Towners Need Not Apply

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By Mitchell Moss

Although Police Commissioner Lee Brown resigned because of family responsibilities, his departure should not come as a surprise. Almost all of Mayor Dinkins' principal appointees from out-of-town have - for different reasons - been unable to stay the course through the mayor's first term of office.

Woody Myers, Dinkins' first commissioner of health, has hightailed it back to his home state of Indiana; Allyn Sielaff, the mayor's first corrections commissioner, who came to New York from Cleveland with a national reputation, resigned after the riot at Rikers Island and accusations of mismanagement; and Emilio Carillo, a physician from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, quit as president of the Health and Hospitals corporation after questions arose about his personal finances and hiring practices.

The list of out-of-towners who have failed to make it in New York City government stretches back for decades. Harvey Scribner of Vermont and Calvin Gross of Pittsburgh were imported to be schools chancellors. Abraham Kauber came from Denver to head the Health and Hospitals (corporation, and Howard Leary from Philadelphia to be police commissioner, and neither survived very long.

A handful of executives have successfully made the transition to running public agencies in New York - but they are the exception, not the rule. David Gunn saved our subways; William Bratton reinvigorated the Transit Police, and Richard

Green was an inspirational figure from Minneapolis who died before he could make his mark as schools chancellor.

Elected officials appoint out-of-towners to high-level positions for a variety of reasons. Such hirings can infuse mayoral priorities at tradition-bound agencies. Picking someone with neither local friends nor local enemies is a convenient way to avoid immediate local conflicts, and sometimes it offers a "quick-fix" approach to improving minority representation in top administrative jobs.

The problem with bringing out-of-towners into New York City government is that the programs and techniques that work in most other cities can rarely be transferred here successfully. Experience elsewhere can easily be defeated by the sheer size of New York - more people live in Manhattan than in the entire city of Boston - and by its diversity. Unlike Atlanta or Chicago, New York is a city in which there is no dominant minority but, rather, a majority of minorities.

Moreover, the scale of the public sector - approximately a quarter-million people work for New York City - dwarfs that of most municipalities. It takes at least a year for a new executive to understand the culture of New York City and the structure of its government, as well as the distinctive roles of the media, community groups and unions. And how many newcomers are prepared to devote the time and energy necessary to implement their ideas in the contentious environment of New York?

The paradox about the city's eagerness to hire outsiders is that we are willing to assign responsibility for our most vital public services - schools, police and health care - to people who have no first-hand knowledge of the city's complex social and economic conditions. Even the most talented leader winds up putting out administrative brushfires rather than gaining control over the organization.

Instead of recruiting loaders from outside New York, we should invest in strengthening initiatives such as the "Urban Fellows" program, which attracts young people fresh out of college every year into New York City government. The mayor should develop a management program - similar to those in the private sector - that rotates executives through several different agencies in order to refine their skills. Rather than talk about privatization, we should establish a citywide system that rewards outstanding management and links compensation to

performance.

We could learn from the world of sports: The best-run teams develop their own talent from within and have strong and stable leadership over many years, as demonstrated by the remarkable records of Don Shula, Tom Landry and Joe Gibbs. All too often, unfortunately, New York's model is Cleveland's George Steinbrenner, and the results are comparable.

Elected officials should emphasize the opportunities for building upon the remarkable bank of talent that already exists within New York City, not just in government, but in non-profit organizations, local economic development corporations and in business.

New York's problems are too important and too pressing to risk on untested and unproven out-of-towners. Rather than subsidize the learning process out-of-towners require to master the city, we should develop our own executive talent from among those who have already demonstrated their commitment to the City of New York.

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