

Massachusetts' head of public safety to step down

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 23, 2020, 11:16 a.m.



The Massachusetts State House in Boston on July 16. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Amid a push for law enforcement reforms across Massachusetts, the state's top public safety official is planning to step down after less than two years at the helm.

Executive Office of Public Safety and Security Secretary Thomas A. Turco III, who oversees the State Police and the state's prisons, parole board, sex offender board, and medical examiner's office, sent his staff an e-mail Wednesday morning noting he plans to retire at the end of the year.

Turco, 56, wrote that his decision came "following many long discussions with my family," but offered no further explanation for his departure.

He sent the memo to staff hours after the Globe requested copies of paperwork he had filed with the state's retirement board. Those records show Turco submitted his retirement application in early August.

He initially planned his exit for Oct. 1, records show, but Turco wrote to the board last week and asked to push back his departure to Nov. 7.

Turco, who makes \$170,000 a year, also asked the retirement board to boost his pension by reclassifying his two most recent positions with the state — his current role and his previous one leading the Department of Correction. The board denied that request on Sept. 1, records show.

Turco, through a spokesman, declined interview requests Wednesday.

In a statement, Governor Charlie Baker said Turco "has worked tirelessly to improve public safety and security for all residents" during his three decades working for the state. "He has served as a critical partner in driving criminal justice reform and advocacy, has guided essential efforts to support survivors and has led on initiatives to offer more protections for individuals and families."

Turco has worked in the cabinet-level role since December 2018. Turco's tenure has included clashes with Suffolk District Attorney Rachael Rollins and is marked by scandals at agencies under his purview, including the State Police and Department of Correction.

Rollins acknowledged on Wednesday her past battles with Turco, and said their relationship has "grown and evolved into one of respect and admiration." She said they both "deeply care about victims and survivors," creating safe and healthy communities, and "we want the people that come into contact with the criminal legal system to succeed."

Representative Timothy Whelan, a Cape Cod Republican and former State Police sergeant, said Turco "made his office a valuable resource for us in the Legislature," including during the recent push for policing reform.

"I found him to be a staunch advocate for law enforcement and for public safety," said Whelan, adding that he hopes whoever replaces Turco is "as outspoken an advocate for public safety as Secretary Turco has been."

Whelan said Turco was instrumental in helping to set up initial discussions between law enforcement officials and members of the Black and Latino Legislative Caucus. The police reform legislation has languished since lawmakers moved it to closed-door negotiations in late July.

Elizabeth Matos, executive director of Prisoners' Legal Services, a nonprofit that advocates for inmates' rights, said she'd like to see someone with a much different perspective and background as the next head of public safety.

"Someone who has demonstrated a commitment to maximizing rehabilitation efforts, investing meaningfully in reentry, and drastically lowering recidivism through evidence-based practices," Matos said.

She expressed disappointment that the state, under Turco's leadership, has not heeded calls to independently investigate allegations that state correction officers had earlier this year used excessive force on inmates at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Shirley. Matos's organization alleged their actions were reprisal for an attack by inmates that injured several guards.

Before becoming public safety secretary, Turco ran the state's prison system for more than two and a half years, following a career in several roles in the probation department that began in 1989.

In his memo to staff Wednesday, Turco said he was particularly proud of the agency's work during the pandemic.

"At every level of the office, you have embraced our duty to protect the public from a threat very different from any we have confronted before, and worked seamlessly with Governor Baker and Lt. Governor Polito, our partner agencies, and one another to ensure the highest levels of service to all the Commonwealth's communities," Turco wrote.

Turco said he plans to support the Baker administration "as they identify and select the next Secretary, and I will impress upon that person the remarkable skills, talents, and passion that mark the EOPSS team."

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