

Osceola Sheriff Marco López selects nearly all-white command staff despite campaign promises of diversity



Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel

Osceola County Sheriff Marco López with his administrative team following his swearing in ceremony outside the Osceola County Historical Courthouse in downtown Kissimmee, on Tuesday, January 5, 2021.

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One of the pillars of Marco López's platform in his 2016 and 2020 campaigns for Osceola County sheriff was the promise of increased diversity at a mostly-white agency that polices a community that is majority Hispanic.

López's upset win over incumbent Sheriff Russ Gibson in August's Democratic primary came as that message was especially relevant amid nationwide uprisings against police brutality and systemic racism, a reckoning that brought heightened scrutiny of [disproportionately white law enforcement agencies](#) and their policing of communities of color.

"I'm a firm believer if you don't look like the people you serve, you're never going to create that transparency and present that accountability for our community," López [told the Sentinel editorial board](#), which endorsed him in the [primary](#) and [general election](#). "... [Gibson's] administration right now, there's probably four or five minority

administrators, one female. We should at least 60% minority-based.”

But a roster of now-Sheriff Lopez’s sworn command staff obtained by the Sentinel revealed there is only one Hispanic captain or major — two fewer than his predecessor — and one woman. The rest are white men, many of whom have been. Among those is Maj. Dan Weis, who served in the past two administrations and was featured in at least two memes posted on López’s 2016 campaign Facebook page, including one which described him and three others as part of a “good ole boy network.”

The posts were still online as of Friday — on what is now the sheriff’s official page — and it’s unclear whether Weis was aware of the posts while he was being considered for the new administration.

López said in a text he won’t be available for an interview until February, while he attends a Florida Sheriff’s Association conference next week in St. Johns County. Sheriff’s Office spokeswoman Nirva Rodríguez also denied a request to interview him, and a list of detailed questions went unanswered as of Friday afternoon. “When the Sheriff is ready for interview, we will let you know. We are very busy in the middle of a transition,” Rodríguez said in an email to the Sentinel.

Capt. Alejandro Guevara, who had been at the Sheriff’s Office since 1999 and oversaw the West Patrol Division, was one of two high-ranking Hispanic members of Gibson’s administration who say they were told before López took office that their services would no longer be required.

“I respected that decision, but it was just a little ironic that we talk about being pro-Hispanic, but here we are getting rid of Hispanics,” Guevara told the Sentinel.



Osceola County Sheriff swearing in ceremony for Marco Lopez, outside the Osceola County Historical Courthouse in downtown Kissimmee, on Tuesday, January 5, 2021. Lopez is Osceola County's first Hispanic sheriff. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/ Orlando Sentinel)

‘A little ironic’

López was greeted as a local celebrity at his Jan. 5 [swearing-in ceremony](#): Following his remarks to the community, delivered in English and Spanish, attendees crowded around him, jostling each other for selfies with Osceola's first Hispanic sheriff.

Standing behind him was a group of uniformed people, almost all of whom would make up his new administration, with decades of experience among them.

“As you can see, they probably have a little more gray hair than I do,” he joked. “It’s a very experienced team that I selected, and I do feel like they are the people who share my vision. ... They’re going to help bring all these future young Hispanic generations to come [to the agency].”

But López throughout his campaign argued for the need to diversify the Sheriff's Office from the brass to patrols. As of last summer, only about 31% of the agency's deputies were Hispanic, versus more than half of unincorporated Osceola County. Over the last 20 years, the county overall had among the highest demographic shifts in the country as Hispanics moved to the area — making up 55% of the population in 2018 compared to 29% in 2000, [according to a Pew report](#).

Two high-ranking Hispanic officials who didn't make the cut for López's administration were Guevara and Maj. Jacob Ruiz, who until López's election was the highest-ranking Puerto Rican in the agency's history.

He and Guevara both announced their retirement from the agency weeks before López officially assumed office but both said that was after they were given letters dated Dec. 2 from López's transition team saying their "services with the Osceola County Sheriff's Office will no longer be needed."

"Marco López fired me," [Ruiz told El Sentinel Orlando](#), the Sentinel's Spanish-language newspaper.

The news came as a surprise to Guevara, he said, as other officials from the previous administration, many of whom are white, were demoted and reassigned, while the three Hispanics — including Capt. Ruben Pacheco — filed for retirement.

Guevara said he was not bitter about López's decision to oust him but decided to speak out after Rodríguez, the agency spokeswoman who also worked for López's campaign, denied to El Sentinel that Ruiz had been fired. She argued López didn't have the authority at the time to fire people.

It's unclear why the decision was made, or why others were offered the opportunity to be reassigned while Guevara and Ruiz were not. Questions about that decision went unanswered by press time Friday.

"They told me they wanted to move in another direction, but many of the white officials are still there and are now sergeants or lieutenants," said Ruiz, who's been at the agency for 17 years and was the spokesman under Gibson. "... But [López] never gave me that option."

Agency records show five of Gibson's 12 senior leaders were demoted and reassigned to other areas at the agency. Another five — the three Hispanics, Chief Deputy Kevin McGinley and Capt. Daniel Marquith — filed for retirement.

Weis, a captain under Gibson who was promoted to major under López, and Capt. James Spain were the only two holdouts selected to serve on the new sheriff's command staff.

'Good Ole Boy Network'

López's sheriff campaigns are no strangers to controversy. His most recent campaign kicked off in 2019 with him [getting fired by Gibson](#), who was running for reelection.

And in 2016, he was the subject of an internal investigation after several posts on his Facebook page took aim at the agency's lack of diversity. The posts were accompanied by memes featuring four members of then-Sheriff Bob Hansell's command staff with the words "good ole boy network" emblazoned across the image.

It also implied that the agency was at risk of facing an uprising like those that followed the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Md.

"On November 8th we as residents of Osceola County must make a decision on the future of our community," the Aug. 12, 2016 post read. "Do we continue with the 'status quo' Good Ole Boy Network law enforcement agency that will eventually lead us to a Ferguson and or a Baltimore or we move to a new horizon with a DIVERSE law enforcement agency. #change #riggedsystem"

Another meme, posted a day earlier, shortly after a primary debate, used the same four men juxtaposed with a stock photo of four officers of different races.

Included in the images is Weis, who made several donations to López's opponents in 2016 but contributed \$500 to his 2020 campaign, according to campaign finance records.

López was questioned about both images, which Hansell claimed in a complaint was a violation of policies prohibiting criticism against the agency. He denied having posted either image, saying it might have been another person authorized to post on his campaign Facebook page, which is now being used as his official page as sheriff.

Despite the denial, he said he didn't "disagree with the post" making parallels to unrest in Ferguson and Baltimore, while also defending the officers involved in the Brown and Gray cases.

"I didn't post it, but I think where [they're] going with that and I can give you my opinion," López said, according to the report. "I think it stemmed from Baltimore and Ferguson, not that the cops did anything wrong. They were all exonerated."

Following the investigation and an appeal, López was demoted from sergeant to deputy sheriff.

Throughout the 2020 race, López claimed the investigation into the posts was backlash against his push to create a community advisory board and diversify for the Sheriff's Office, in keeping with his self-depiction [as a reformer](#) seeking to make a difference as sheriff after years of being stymied as a subordinate.

In past interviews with the Sentinel and at his inauguration, López talked about how him being Hispanic was not a reason he ran to lead Osceola's largest law enforcement agency. Instead, he said he did so to take on past practices and make the agency more accountable to the community, while hiring deputies who better reflect its demographics.

"We were fighting a monster, and we did it," López said at his swearing-in to a cheering crowd, many waving Puerto Rican flags.

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