

C.J. Davis, an outsider with national profile, becomes first woman to lead Memphis Police Department

Samuel Hardiman Memphis Commercial Appeal

Published 4:29 p.m. CT May 4, 2021 | Updated 6:42 p.m. CT May 4, 2021



Cerelyn "C.J." Davis will soon be Memphis' top cop. The Memphis City Council confirmed Davis' appointment to be the next chief of the Memphis Police Department on Tuesday afternoon.

Davis said she was "humbled" to be selected and described the police department as "just one cog in the wheel" in reducing violent crime. Memphis saw 332 homicides in 2020.

The new police chief repeated what she had said in interviews and public appearances saying that MPD would focus on the small minority of individuals that are responsible for a high percentage of the crime. Davis, the current police chief in Durham, North Carolina, and a longtime member of the Atlanta Police Department, is the first outsider to lead the department in decades.

During her confirmation hearings Tuesday, Davis also faced questions about the potential time limit on her tenure. Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland, who appointed Davis, is term-limited and will leave the office at the end of 2023.

The new police chief said she hoped the initial two-and-half years of her tenure would be so successful that the next mayor would feel a need to keep her on the job.

Davis remains the Durham police chief. Her first day as Memphis chief will be June 14. She will make \$230,037.60, the same as her predecessor Mike Rallings.

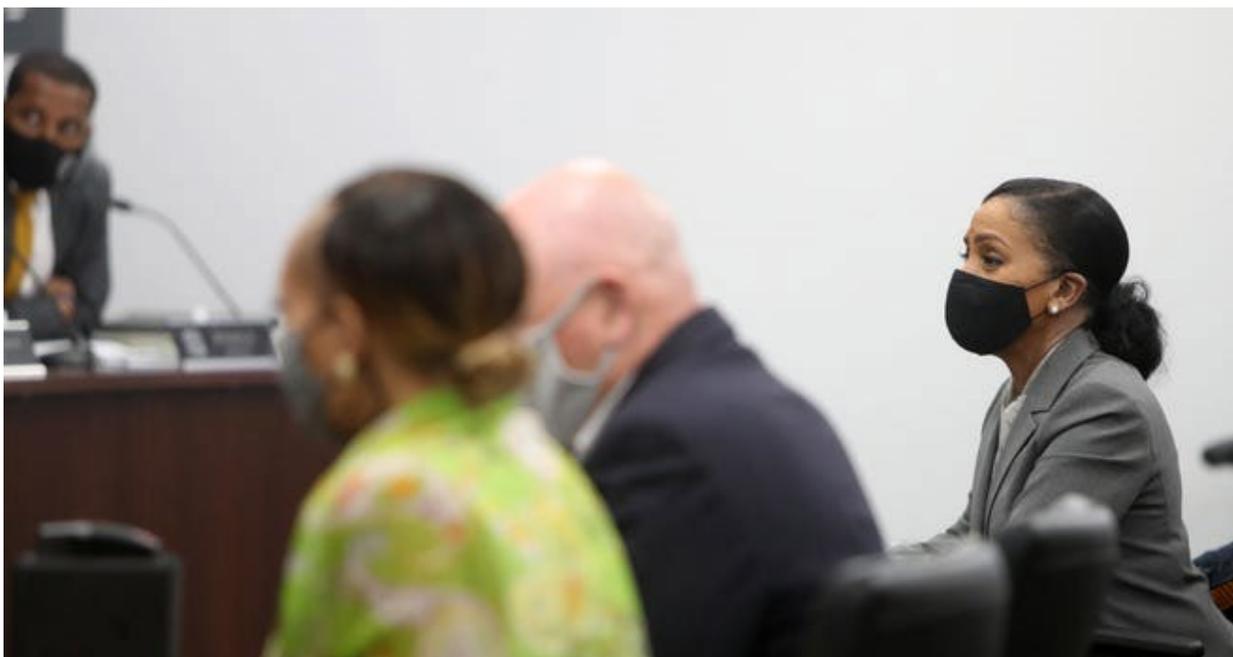
The vote to confirm went 11 yay, 1 no and one abstention. Councilman Martavius Jones voted against Davis' confirmation. Before the vote, Jones said his vote was not a reflection of what he wanted his working relationship with Davis to be and said he spoke to someone in Atlanta who vouched for her.

Jones expressed a preference for a candidate from within MPD's ranks and throughout Davis' appointment process pushed for a robust public input process.

Councilwoman Rhonda Logan abstained. She also expressed a preference for an internal candidate.

"Though she comes acclaimed, I can't say that she is the best candidate, we didn't hear from the other candidates. I don't have anything against her and actually liked her presentation, she was quite poised, but this isn't about who I like it's about the most qualified and the best person for the department and for the city. We had some accomplished and very capable and experienced candidates from within as well," Logan said in a text message to *The Commercial Appeal*.

A rising star of police reform



Cerelyn "C.J." Davis listens at a Memphis City Council committee hearing considering her nomination Tuesday as the next chief of police services. *Ariel Cobbert / The Commercial Appeal*

Throughout her tenure in Durham, and particularly the last year, Davis has positioned herself as an agent of change and police reform. Following the death of George Floyd last year, Davis spoke to the U.S. Senate about modifying qualified immunity — a policy that keeps police officers from being liable for their actions as private citizens.

Davis picked up that theme again Tuesday and spoke of the need for the Civilian Law Enforcement Review Board, known as CLERB, to have some oversight of the department.

"Just having that relationship and that transparency with the civilian review board or CLERB helps to build the trust and helps with transparency that the police department isn't doing its own investigation," Davis said.

Those who know Davis said Memphis should expect someone who will shake up the status quo.

"They can expect a chief that's dedicated to being a change agent," said Lynda R. Williams, a retired U.S. Secret Service executive who now serves as national president of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Officers, succeeding Davis in that role. Williams' comments came in an interview with The CA.

What's next for internal finalists who were passed over?



Memphis City Councilman J.B. Smiley Jr. speaks during a committee hearing considering the nomination of Cerelyn "C.J." Davis as the next chief of police services. *Ariel Cobbert / The Commercial Appeal*

Davis was asked directly by Memphis City Councilman JB Smiley, Jr. about the three internal MPD finalists for the job of chief and whether they would stay with the department. Those finalists were Deputy Chiefs Sharonda Hampton, Michael Shearin and Samuel Hines.

The new chief said she would meet with not just those three but the entire command staff to get a sense of the department and what those commanders wanted to do in their careers. She spoke positively of their qualifications, noting that they had managed to be finalists for the job she won.

Q & A: Cerelyn "C.J." Davis calls for community to take part in public safety

"I plan to talk to them one on one about not just the work that they do, but what their career aspirations are, how do we help them get there? How do we build a team so that we can impact change in Memphis, and we do it together?" Davis said.

During a news conference after her confirmation, Davis said she would not move quickly to appoint a new command staff and praised the existing talent within the department.

Samuel Hardiman covers Memphis city government and politics for The Commercial Appeal. He can be reached by email at samuel.hardiman@commercialappeal.com or followed on Twitter at [@samhardiman](https://twitter.com/samhardiman).