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Search for Miami-Dade elections chief bogs down

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Appointing a new supervisor of elections in Miami-Dade County has proved to be as difficult as trying to kick one out in Broward County.

In the wake of the disastrous Sept. 10 primary, longtime Supervisor of Elections David Leahy announced his retirement -- a move that County Manager Steve Shiver hoped would allow him to bring in a leader to restore the department's credibility with voters.

After a nationwide search for a new supervisor led Shiver last month to a deputy elections administrator in Chicago, Miami-Dade officials were certain the Elections Department would soon be off to a promising new start.

But Shiver's three-week-old invitation to lead the disorganized department is still on Constance Kaplan's desk -- unanswered. The 30-year veteran of the Chicago Elections Board of Commissioners has responded with a barrage of questions that show how wary she is of grappling with Miami-Dade's fractious politics.

Kaplan also has questioned Shiver's effort to restructure the election department's administrative responsibilities since Leahy announced his resignation -- a process that critics say has essentially created three chiefs and could leave her with too little authority to effectively lead.

In two letters to Shiver, Kaplan requested extensive information on the department's structure and her authority to hire and fire employees. Her uneasiness stems from a Shiver's decision to create the new position of director of elections and to give that job to a longtime county employee who would report to one of Shiver's assistants.

Shiver said the purpose of the new job was to take the pressure off the supervisor of elections by having someone else handle daily administrative activities. But when an internal organizational table depicted the new position as having as much power as the supervisor's job, county commissioners cried foul.

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Concerned that the new supervisor would have insufficient powers under Shiver's new structure, county commissioners voted unanimously last week to direct Shiver to make certain "that the supervisor of elections is the county official having complete responsibility for the administration and management" of the department.

"The bottom line is that we wanted to make sure that the supervisor would be in charge of the all the activities and personnel in terms of running the department," said County Commissioner Dennis Moss, who sponsored the resolution.

Since then, Shiver's office has revised the organizational chart, placing the newly created position under the authority of the supervisor.

But civic leaders are watching the process with a wary eye, concerned that under Shiver's plan the county's next elections chief may not be given the authority to regain the public's confidence.

"Any sensible person that has been offered a job under these circumstances would have reason to think twice," said Santiago Leon, vice president of the Miami-Dade League of Women Voters. "Those kinds of moves or arrangements send a very clear message, that I am going to keep you on a short leash and that I am going to give you the minimum power of authority that I can get away with you, it tends to take the zest out of the situation a little bit."

In a recent letter, Shiver assured Kaplan that as a department head she would have the authority to hire and fire employees.

But Kaplan, who has yet to accept the post, still had doubts.

"It is my intention to be a hands-on supervisor of elections and it is essential that I understand the county's dynamics, office staff and current operations before finalizing my decision," she responded.

Since then, Kaplan has said that the commission's vote was "a very nice gesture." But she is wary of uprooting her family and accepting the post without a contract -- which only county commissioners can approve.

Her chances of winning one are difficult. Only three of the county's 13 commissioners have publicly said they would support giving Kaplan a contract.

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