

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 Mayoral Candidates

DAY 9: MANDATORY ALCOHOL AND DRUG TESTING

Do you believe mandatory alcohol and drug testing should be required for all uniformed public safety employees and EMTs and, if so, how should such testing be achieved?

Drug testing for public safety employees has been at the forefront of city issues for many years. Currently, drug testing requirements must be negotiated through the collective bargaining process. The City negotiated annual drug testing with its police officers in 1998 and annual drug testing with its EMTs in 2008. However, the firefighters have not agreed to drug testing, leaving Boston with different testing regimes for different public safety unions.

Since 2000, two separate reports about Boston Fire Department operations recommended that firefighters be subject to drug testing. Drug testing was on the table in contract negotiations between the City and firefighters' union in 2000 and 2004, with no agreement reached. The two parties are now in binding arbitration to settle the firefighters' contract that expired on June 30, 2006 and random alcohol and drug testing is an issue for resolution. The two parties differ in their respective views of the monetary value of an alcohol and drug testing policy in the context of other contract changes sought and the City's fiscal position.

The issue of alcohol and drug testing is not so much whether it should be implemented but by what means. Proponents of a statewide legislative requirement argue it would ensure a uniform standard throughout the Commonwealth rather than the current patchwork system of municipalities that may or may not require testing or may use different standards if they do. A state system, they argue, would help ensure all uniformed public safety officers are alert and not impaired when on duty serving the public. This system would give confidence to fellow officers during stressful and dangerous work situations and during times of mutual aid when working with officers from other municipalities.

Those favoring the collective bargaining process make the case that alcohol and drug testing is a condition of employment and that the public safety officers should be included in the decision of whether and what drug testing policy should be implemented. They argue that drug testing has been successfully negotiated in other Massachusetts contracts and there is no reason to change this policy now.

Do you believe that all uniformed public safety officers and EMTs should be subject to mandatory alcohol and drug testing? Should such testing be achieved statewide by enacting legislation or through collective bargaining negotiations?

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