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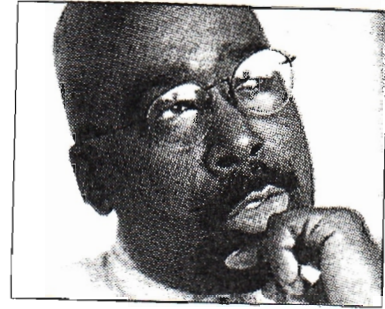
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"I'VE DONE the big-city thing. The difference is in the magnitude. The opportunity here in Richmond is to have half the stress and twice the fun," says Joseph Samuels.

Richmond just fine to new chief

■ Joseph Samuels is eager to prove his approach to policing after Jerry Brown forced him out as head of Oakland's force

David Ferris
TIMES STAFF WRITER

RICHMOND — Joseph Samuels has a new perspective on his job. The title's the same, but the scenery has changed for a man who for six years ran a police force from a cavernous office eight floors above the East Bay's biggest city.

This morning Oakland's former police chief will be sworn in as the top officer in Richmond. Gone is his view of the towering Oakland City Hall building. Instead, from an office half the size of his old one, he will look out his second-story window at the driveways of a few small houses.

Forced out in March by Oakland's new mayor, Jerry Brown, Samuels takes over a force that is by far the smallest of the three police departments he's led. And he takes a \$24,000 pay cut.

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Chief

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So does he think he's gotten a raw deal? Not to hear him tell it.

"I've done the big-city thing," said Samuels, 50, in a lengthy interview at his office Friday. "The difference is in the magnitude. The opportunity here in Richmond is to have half the stress and twice the fun."

Which is not to say the expectations aren't intense.

Residents are frustrated with a nagging crime rate that lately has bucked a national downward trend in homicides. City leaders expect him to quell the fears of businesses and home buyers who equate "Richmond" with "danger." And Samuels, who is black, becomes the first minority chief of a department with lingering racial divisions.

He will confront a per capita homicide rate that surpasses those of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Oakland. Since 1988, the dawn of the crack epidemic in Richmond, 450 people have been killed there.

Troubling new increase

And after a sharp decline in murders from 1996 to 1998, the city is once again seeing a troubling spate of killing. The 20 homicides reported so far this year exceed the total of 18 last year. Police credit many of the deaths to drug deals gone bad.

"I keep seeing people get killed and you just never know. You start to think it's safe, but I don't think it's safe anywhere anymore, not even in your own house," said Flo Jimenez, a Richmond resident whose brother was shot in the chest last year on the doorstep of his house on 13th Street.

Richmond residents say they want a chief who's accessible and who's

everywhere at once. In short, they say they want another Bill Landsdowne, Samuels' popular predecessor who over four years sold the department on community policing and oversaw a drop in crime. Landsdowne is now the chief in San Jose.

"I would like (Samuels) to keep up community policing like we've been doing and elevate it upward," said Naomi Williams, president of the neighborhood council for the Pullman area on the city's south side. "I'd like him to be more visible to the community as a whole, like the former police chief did, while being his own person at the same time."

Samuels, looking well-rested with shaved pate, round glasses, and goatee flecked with gray, said running a smaller department will allow him more time to get to know community members; to join the birthday-cake and plastic-fork circuit in his department; and most importantly, to solve more problems.

In a sign of commitment to the city, Samuels said he plans to move to Richmond and has put a bid in on a home in the Richmond part of El Sobrante. With him will come his wife, Sabrina, who works in the fashion industry, and his 16-year-old, Joe, who will move from an Oakland school to one closer to Richmond.

Samuels has a four-year contract with Richmond. He makes no promises about what will happen then.

"Ask me that question in three or four years," he said, adding that "I wouldn't accept the job if I thought I was leaving in a year or two."

His smallest force

Richmond's 186-officer force is a small bunch compared to the other departments Samuels has led, in Oakland and Fresno. The Fresno force had more than twice as many officers, and Oakland nearly four

times as many.

Samuels joined the Oakland police in 1974 after a brief stint as a bank manager.

As an officer, he said, he had more people skills than street smarts.

"The knocking down doors, working late nights, writing search warrants, I wasn't that kind of person," said Samuels, who is broad-shouldered and 6 feet, 4 inches tall. "I was more interested in preventing the crimes in the first place."

Samuels majored in education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and has a master's degree in public administration from Cal State Hayward.

With the Oakland force, he rose in 17 years to the rank of captain. In 1991, he was lured away to run the Fresno Police Department. Samuels made changes that transformed a demoralized and seriously understaffed organization, said Fresno police Lt. John Fries.

As Fresno chief, Samuels started several community programs and laid out a long-range hiring plan that resulted in 268 new officers on the force.

"What Samuels really did was turn the department and focus us on something other than just responding to emergency calls," Fries said.

Crime in decline

Samuels returned to Oakland for the top job in 1992. Since then, Oakland has seen reported crime decline by 56 percent in homicides, 19 percent in rapes, 42 percent for robberies, 20 percent in felony assaults and 31 percent in burglaries.

Samuels started the city's community-policing program despite being chronically short-staffed by 60 or more officers, and he founded crime-prevention councils across the city.

Few are the public criticisms of

Samuels within Oakland police circles. Some Oakland officers, though, said he seemed aloof with the troops.

Samuels, who regularly wears his uniform and gun to work as a sign of solidarity with his officers, said he aims to be equitable, if not every officer's pal.

Samuels' accomplishments weren't enough to please Brown, who took office in January with a campaign promise to cut crime by 20 percent in one year. Samuels was one of three department heads who were asked to resign. Brown picked Oakland Capt. Richard Word as the new chief.

Samuels says now that the separation "left a bitter taste in my mouth."

A cautious contract

It also left him cautious when arranging his employment with Richmond. Samuels, who was hired by City Manager Isiah Turner after a lengthy search both within the department and nationwide, negotiated a four-year contract.

The deal makes him the only high-ranking city official other than Turner to be under contract, making it more costly for the city to fire him.

Samuels' \$114,000 salary may also be raised in coming months, Turner said.

In return, much is expected from him.

Turner said he wants Samuels to take Richmond's community policing program to a higher level, by leading coordination among city departments to stamp out the markers of neighborhood blight, such as abandoned homes and graffiti-stained walls.

Officials said Samuels' prime duties will be to cool down the city's hottest drug-dealing areas and integrate high-tech tools into fighting

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— Police Chief Joseph Samuels

crime. Most importantly, he must slow down the killing.

"There's going to be a tremendous amount of pressure on (Samuels) to keep the homicide rate down this year and in future years," said City Councilman Tom Butt.

Samuels said he plans to continue his habit of putting in 60-hour weeks, including some weekends. He expects to meet often with neighborhood groups, church congregations and the business community.

But, he added, he is just the "orchestra conductor" for anti-crime efforts by businesses and residents.

"Richmond can be as good as it chooses to be," he said. "If the community comes together for a common purpose and puts aside its hidden agendas and special purposes, it will become even greater as a city."

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