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N.J.'s top anti-corruption watchdog names its first black leader

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There's nothing wrong with spark plugs, Chadd Lackey said. He just didn't find them interesting.

Lackey grew up outside of Detroit, so it was natural to work for a car company after college. But in the early 1990s, after one particularly unsatisfying meeting at Toyota, he wondered what else was out there.

He thought of his grandfather, the first black detective in Ecorse, Michigan. A colleague mentioned law school, and Lackey started studying for the LSAT. He bombed it once, he said, so took it again.

More than two decades later, after law enforcement jobs in Florida and New Jersey, Lackey is about to become the first African American head of the State Commission of Investigation, the Garden State's top corruption watchdog. His promotion to executive director was announced Thursday.

"The talent here is incredible," Lackey, 51, told NJ Advance Media. "This is going to be a really good year."

State lawmakers formed the commission in the 1960s to target organized crime. It quickly picked fights with people like Angelo Bruno, the mob boss recently played by Harvey Keitel in the film "The Irishman." Bruno was famously jailed for refusing to testify, and then murdered after he finally appeared before the commission.

The group has published about 130 investigations overall, exposing street gangs and polluters and a host of other abuses. State law has changed because of their work, and they've tracked tens of millions of dollars recovered in taxes. In October, they hauled alleged leaders of the Pagan Motorcycle Club to a public hearing and accused the group of violence and drug dealing. The investigation is ongoing.

Around the time the commission was ringing alarm bells about Russian gangsters, in the mid-1990s, Lackey was finishing up at Temple University's law school. He had one goal.

"I really thought that, as an African American man, wielding the power as a prosecutor would be very important," he said.

He got that job in Florida, where he was hired by Katherine Rundle, the state attorney in Miami-Dade County. In a statement sent by a spokesman, Rundle called Lackey's tenure

“dramatically effective.” She said he was particularly good at understanding how a single legal decision could affect an entire community.

Lackey eventually spent three-plus years as an Assistant State Attorney in Miami-Dade, according to that office’s human resources department. He started with New Jersey’s commission in 2005.

Lackey said he was most proud of leading a 2013 opioid investigation, that showed how corrupt doctors shilling painkillers could create addicts.

At the time, Lackey was in charge of about eight investigators, which allowed him to make quick decisions as they worked. Now that he’ll be leading more than 40 people, he said the biggest adjustment he needed to make was to slow down when facing tough choices.

Seeing most of that staff assembled in one room shortly before he was announced as their new boss was one moment that did make him nervous.

“That’s when it became real to me,” he said. “That as director, my obligations were greater than any obligation I’d had thus far.”

Lackey answers to a four-person bipartisan commission appointed by lawmakers and the governor. A unanimous decision is not required to elect a new leader, although all four voted for him.

One of the commissioners, Robert Burzichelli, said the SCI’s opioid investigation was particularly impressive, because it came years before the connection between painkillers and heroin was widely known.

“He had a very good nose about that problem,” Burzichelli said.

Lackey said he was satisfied with the group’s \$4.7 million annual budget, and didn’t have an added wish list for lawmakers.

Although there have been stretches where the commission released only one report a year, Lackey said he preferred publishing more often. It was also crucial to follow up on old investigations, he said.

Lackey previously worked as the commission’s deputy director, and he said he may begin as acting director before he’s sworn in early next year. The current leader, Lee Seglem, is retiring after more than a quarter century with the commission.