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Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Miami Beach Commission Appoints First Woman Fire Chief in Florida's Most Populous County

— Chief Digna Abello will succeed Virgil Fernandez at the helm of one of the largest fire departments in South Florida —

Miami Beach, FL – The City of Miami Beach has become the first municipality in Miami-Dade County to appoint a woman to lead its fire department, which already holds the distinction of being one of only slightly more than 1% of the 37,983 participating fire agencies in the United States that have attained the prestigious ISO Class 1 rating from the Insurance Services Office.

“I am proud to appoint Chief Digna Abello as the first woman fire chief in Miami Beach and Miami-Dade County history,” said Miami Beach Interim City Manager Rickelle Williams. “Her unwavering integrity, breadth of experience, and innate leadership skills made her the clear and best choice.”

The Miami Beach City Commission unanimously approved Abello’s appointment today, Wednesday, June 26 effective on July 1. She will replace Miami Beach Fire Department Chief Virgil Fernandez who is retiring after more than 10 years with the agency and over four decades of service with fire agencies in South Florida.

“I am confident that I am turning over the department to the best possible candidate who will continue to make the agency stronger in the coming years,” said Fernandez.

Abello began her career as a Miami Beach firefighter over 19 years ago and quickly distinguished herself, rising to the rank of lieutenant with a focus on recruitment and administration. She was subsequently named division chief of support services, division chief of training and division chief of rescue — three major divisions within the department.

“I’m honored to serve the residents of Miami Beach as fire chief and will continue to uphold our department’s tradition of excellence,” said Abello, who was appointed to her current position as deputy chief of administration in 2020, where she has been involved in all significant department matters and initiatives.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Abello directed the department’s comprehensive response strategy, including the development of standard operating procedures and collaboration with relevant health agencies. She successfully launched the agency’s COVID-19 vaccination program that provided inoculations to more than 13,000 vulnerable residents.

She also spearheaded two rigorous ISO Class 1 accreditation cycles, which are based on the Fire Suppression Rating Schedule developed to assess the fire prevention and fire suppression capabilities of fire departments. In addition, Abello has overseen the Public Safety Communications Unit, which responds to all of the city's 911 emergency calls and earned the distinction of being one of only 13 such organizations in the world to hold triple accreditation through the International Academy of Emergency Dispatchers.

The next chief received her bachelor's degree in emergency management from Barry University and holds numerous certifications, including fire inspector, fire officer, fire instructor, National Fire Academy leadership certification, incident command system certification and accreditation manager from the Commission on Fire Accreditation International.

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