

Union: Fire unit staffing too thin

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ENGLEWOOD -- The city has skimmed dangerously on hiring firefighters, union officials say, citing a state report that concluded understaffing contributed to the severe injury of a firefighter in a 2003 house fire.

The 52-member professional department can't dispatch according to national standards. There aren't enough officers per shift or company, and firefighters often work alone inside burning houses, when they should always work in pairs, union officials say.

"We have unsupervised firefighters stretched thin throughout the city," said Capt. John McLoughlin, vice president of the fire officers union.

What's more, Englewood is adding more than 1,100 new residential units in the next few years.

"The building boom in this town is unprecedented, and nothing is being done here," McLoughlin said.

McLoughlin said the city needs to hire eight more people and hold promotions for officers.

"The Englewood Fire Department has been understaffed for at least since I've been here, 20 years," said Fire Chief Robert Moran.

Moran said the city is planning to hire three firefighters, but those are to replace recent retirees. City Manager Cheryl Fuller said future staffing levels are "undetermined at this point."

In the meantime, the city has started the process of designing a new firehouse to replace its 83-year-old firehouse on William Street. The old building is too small for present-day equipment and needs costly repairs to keep it up to code, Moran said.

The new facility will probably cost at least \$3.5 million. The city is considering a location next to the police station on South Van Brunt Street, City Engineer Ken Albert said.

While firefighters are happy about that, some say staffing levels are far more critical from a safety standpoint.

In 2003, Firefighter Michael Sternesky ran out of air while fighting a basement fire on West Hudson Avenue. He tried to escape but collapsed before being found and carried out a window by other firefighters, according to report released this year by the state Division of Fire Safety.

The report concluded that "low staffing levels" and lack of "crew integrity" (firefighters staying paired) were contributing factors in the incident, along with communication failures and supervision problems at the scene.

Sternesky, who was 35 at the time, suffered smoke inhalation and burns and had to retire on disability, Moran said.

While that incident drew state scrutiny, Englewood firefighters say they have been endangered by

working solo at other times.

Firefighter Matthew Kansky fell 40 feet from a ladder truck while working without a partner in 2002. He was trying to climb into a second-story window when the windowsill collapsed.

"No one saw me fall," said Kansky, president of the local firefighters union. "The neighbor actually saw me laying on the ground."

Kansky injured his back and had cuts on his face, but returned to service.

Englewood strives to have 10 firefighters and two officers on duty each shift. But when firefighters go on vacation, are sick or disabled, the shift can drop to six firefighters and one officer. When an alarm comes, those men divide themselves among two engines and one ladder truck.

National standards call for each apparatus to have four firefighters. Many professional and volunteer companies struggle with that staffing mandate. In Teaneck and Hackensack, the professional departments make sure each apparatus has at least three people: two firefighters and one officer. Englewood, by contrast, often has two men per apparatus, neither of them officers. The department has no female firefighters.

Understaffing also means that Englewood sometimes initially responds to fires with just one officer. To help fight the fire, the officer sometimes joins the men inside. That means there is no "incident commander" supervising the fire from outside, sometimes for several minutes.

"I went to a fire not too long ago on Decatur Avenue," Kansky said. "There was one officer working. He was in the building on the second floor with the members. There was nobody outside watching what's going on, to see what the smoke's doing. If somebody came to a window [needing help], who would see them?"

That's also a concern for nearby towns that have mutual aid agreements with Englewood.

"They're grossly undermanned, said Teaneck Fire Chief Robert Montgomery. "And that causes concern when they don't have an incident commander. When I send my men over there, who are they reporting to?"

Englewood Council President Scott Reddin said he wants to hire more fire personnel because each shift needs a second officer at all times. "For safety reasons, I understand that," he said.

Reddin suggested hiring one new firefighter per year, gradually adding maybe five or six positions.

Councilman Ken Rosenzweig, on the other hand, said the city needs to "balance the needs of the Fire Department with the resources the city has to offer." Staffing should be confidentially negotiated between the city manager and the unions, he added, and he deferred to Fuller's judgment.

But the union officials say the administration has pushed this issue off for too long.

"Understaffed fire departments affect the safety of everybody: the citizens, the firefighters, everyone involved," McLoughlin said.

Inadequate staffing can also affect a town's insurance rating, Montgomery said. If Englewood's rating drops, property insurance rates could rise all over the city.

"We're just asking for some action," Kansky said. "We have third-party reports, so it's not just us saying we need more people."

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