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Firefighters Feel the Squeeze of Shrinking Budgets

In small and large cities alike, firefighters have gone from heroes to budget bait.

BY: JONATHAN WALTERS | JANUARY 2011

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As a matter of political gospel -- and survival -- firefighters are sacrosanct. No matter the depths of a municipality's budget crisis, neither the firefighters' ranks, pay nor benefits are touchable. There are no reductions in force for firefighters. And yet, in cities all across the country, that's exactly what has been happening. The men and women in red are becoming as vulnerable to budget cuts as other municipal employees.

The new landscape has clearly been shaped by the brutal fiscal conditions in localities. In an era of such severe economic uncertainty, high-level municipal officials -- elected and otherwise -- have not been shy about portraying firefighters as a group that has vacuumed up more than its fair share of municipal resources -- whether it's for

salaries, equipment and firehouses, or for some of the most generous retirement packages offered by local governments today.

But other factors have contributed to the new view, and one is a question of efficacy. There's a growing discussion about whether -- in a world with fewer fires and more emergency medical-related incidents and automobile accidents -- firefighters are deploying resources to maximum effect.

The Cost-Efficiency of Firefighters

Right now, the cost of paying a firefighter is foremost on city officials' minds. Take San Jose, Calif. Over the past decade, the cost of firefighter wages and benefits in the big California city has increased 100 percent, while city revenues have only risen by 20 percent, according to Michelle McGurk, a spokeswoman for the mayor's office. The average firefighter, she says, now costs the city more than \$180,000 per year. Moreover, the highest-paid employees in San Jose aren't high-level city managers -- or even the city manager -- but upper-level members of the city fire service. Firefighters with 30 years of service can retire as early as age 50, with 90 percent of their salary.

That was just the beginning of the tough line that the San Jose mayor's office took when it handed out pink slips to 49 firefighters last fall, a decision that the city laid directly at the feet of the San Jose firefighter's union, Local 230. "Let me be very clear," McGurk says, "we didn't have to lay off firefighters. It was the decision of Local 230. They could have come through with concessions."

With an open contract -- the firefighter union's collective bargaining agreement expired in June 2009 -- the city asked Local 230, along with all other city unions with open contracts, to give back roughly 10 percent in wage and benefit concessions in a deal that would have saved the 49 firefighter positions. But Local 230 summarily rejected the idea, arguing that the city wasn't in as bad fiscal shape as it claimed and that firefighters were being asked to bear more than their fair share of cuts.

Painting firefighters as something of a pampered class -- well paid with retirement packages that would be the envy of anyone in either the private or public sectors -- would have been unheard of just a few years ago. Today, it's a widespread practice. Having spent a decade on a post-9/11 pedestal, the profession has been on the receiving end of more stringent scrutiny. Government officials and the public they represent appear to be taking a much harder look at exactly what they are buying when asked to spend bigger and bigger bucks on firefighters, firefighting equipment and emergency response.

In cities where firefighter layoffs haven't occurred, it has frequently been due to concessions wrung from unions -- despite unions' reputation as tough negotiators. But it's not that the unions have caved in easily to city demands. In Jacksonville, Fla., for instance, the firefighters' union at first rejected a contract calling for a two-year, 2 percent pay cut, and that for the first time ever required single firefighters with no dependents to contribute to their health insurance. In the face of rejection, the city promptly followed through on its threat to lay off 15 firefighters, a messy process that involved bumping another two dozen active firefighters to lower-level jobs.

The move was the culmination of several years of tough budgets for Jacksonville, says Misty Skipper, a city spokeswoman. In a city looking at escalating employee costs of 20 percent in the next five years, it means that every employee in government must sacrifice. It's part of a new reality. "In the past, our public safety sectors -- police and fire -- have essentially been held harmless," Skipper says. "This year



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we knew the gap couldn't be addressed just through nonpublic safety areas."

In the face of layoffs, the Jacksonville firefighters' union capitulated. Besides the 2 percent pay cut, single firefighters without dependents will now contribute 5 percent to their health-care coverage. While the 15 laid-off firefighters were reinstated with the recent ratification of the firefighters' contract, the city will still eliminate 15 fire and rescue positions through attrition.

"Obviously, a pay cut is never good, especially when you're already on the low end of the pay scale," says Randy Wyse, president of the Jacksonville Association of Firefighters. (Starting pay for fire and rescue personnel in Jacksonville is just more than \$34,000, with additional pay available for medical training, firefighting-related educational advancement and longevity.) "But my members understood the economic times and responded."

What irritates Wyse about the firefighter cuts -- over and beyond the sacrifice his members are making -- is that in his view, the city is spending millions to keep its professional football team, the Jaguars, happy, and to develop local amenities like a \$600,000 riverwalk. Given that, Wyse thinks the city has the cash for luxuries while it squeezes public safety. He is inclined to label the city's budget crisis "contrived."

Even if city resources may be somewhat constrained, he says, "there's no recession in demand for our services." The number of fire and emergency medical services (EMS) calls is increasing every year. Firefighters are, he says, "becoming the first line in someone's health care."

Fire Departments Around the Country Feel Budget Restrictions

If Jacksonville -- a consolidated city/county government experiencing less budget pain than most large municipalities -- is forcing cuts to fire and rescue, it's easy to predict what's going on in the rest of the country. The litany of cuts, compromises, give backs and service reductions is astonishing.

In the wake of losing 23 firefighter positions in the summer of 2010 -- an almost 25 percent reduction in manpower -- Lowell, Mass., is now counting heavily on mutual aid from surrounding towns for fire suppression services. Firefighters in Muskegon, Mich., ratified a three-year contract that allows the use of more part-time firefighters. In Baltimore, firefighters were given the option of taking five to eight furlough days or risk losing 100 positions. In Elgin, Ill., a Chicago suburb, firefighters agreed to a "no raise, no layoff" contract for 2011 that also reduced its minimum staffing level from 36 to 34, saving the city a reported \$750,000 a year.

In Newark, N.J., firefighters joined in a court challenge at the end of last year to contest a city budget that called for laying off hundreds of municipal employees, including two dozen firefighters. San Diego instituted a "rolling brownout" system, whereby certain firehouses are temporarily closed -- an initiative that takes more than one-tenth of the city's fire and rescue complement off the street each day, saving the city nearly \$12 million per year. Meanwhile, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently unveiled a plan to significantly reduce municipal manpower -- a plan that includes closing some fire stations at night. He is also embracing a proposal by the New York Fire Department to charge motorists up to \$490 to respond to accidents and car fires.

"It's one of the most challenging times I've ever seen," says Tom Wieczorek, former city manager for Ionia, Mich., and now director of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Center for Public Safety Management. In the past, police and fire support staff might have gotten cut, Wieczorek says, but usually front-line police and fire were kept whole. "We're now seeing communities that have been cutting budgets for the past eight years," he says, "but you can only cut parks and recreation so much." Given that 40 to 80 percent of municipal budgets go to public safety, it was inevitable that cuts would eventually hit uniformed services.

One of the big questions right now is whether the fire service is actually learning anything amidst the constant threat of cuts, especially about smarter ways to deploy resources in an era of shrinking budgets and departments. While police departments, especially in larger cities, have embraced a more sophisticated and data-driven approach to the work they do -- allowing them to maintain relatively high performance levels -- there's been less willingness on the fire service's part to embrace data as a way to revamp how fire suppression, EMS and other calls are handled.

For the most part, firefighting is still based on geographically distributed, fixed stations staffed by a set number of personnel who stand by and wait to be dispatched when needed. For the fire service to continue to perform in these leaner times, Wieczorek says, it is now going to have to actively embrace change -- and that's not something that comes easily to the fire service. "The old saying in the fire service," Wieczorek says, "is '100 years of tradition unimpeded by progress.'"

One of the most significant and widely recognized changes in the fire and rescue service is that on average, most calls to fire departments now are for medical emergencies and not fires -- running about 80 percent EMS to 20 percent fire in most jurisdictions where the fire service handles both. At the same time, most calls are either false alarms or not particularly serious. Yet too few fire departments have adapted very well to these realities. For example, San Jose still sends an attack pumper with a full complement of four firefighters to all emergency medical calls.

Tying up four firefighters and a rig for what usually winds up being minor medical emergencies doesn't make any sense, says Bruce Hoover, chief of the Fargo Fire Department in North Dakota. Fargo's protocols used to mirror San Jose's exactly. But now Fargo fire trucks only roll if "there's bleeding, breathing complications or trauma," Hoover says. "We now only respond for true medical emergencies, and that's cut our run count back by 1,000 a year, and has kept apparatus and manpower in place for real emergencies."

But asking tough questions about manpower and deployment is difficult for many municipal officials who don't feel confident tangling with the community's best and bravest. A way to do that, however, without going toe-to-toe with the fire service, Wieczorek says, is simply to ask departments for solid, up-to-date data on demand, along with what measurable results a city is getting for its fire service dollars.

What most municipalities will find when they start to ask good questions about budgets, deployment and service demands is that there aren't many answers to those questions. "We are routinely called into communities to look at manpower and deployment," Wieczorek says. "We find across the board in small and large jurisdictions that data is either nonexistent or totally wrong."

What drives firefighting in the U.S., for the most part, is long-standing practice, not good, current information on what's actually happening on the ground, including number of calls, response times, seriousness of the incident, geographical distribution and time of day, all measured in relation to the geometry of fire service manpower, equipment and deployment.

For example, in one jurisdiction that asked the ICMA to come in and do a thorough analysis of demand, resources and deployment, the ICMA team looked at the busiest five minutes the fire department had in a year. What did the team find? Even at its busiest moment of the year, the city still had seven idle units standing by ready to respond, with 28 available firefighters. Those are just the sorts of analyses -- in combination with the current budget crisis -- that have emboldened policymakers and budget writers to start asking tougher questions about what fire departments really need and how they do business -- and asking them to either hold the line on budgets or cut back.

Looking at both budgets and at more creative and data-driven ways to handle staffing and deployment are key. "Don't get caught up in the hysteria trap of believing that if you pursue things like brownouts and budget cuts that children are going to die and senior citizens will burn up," Wieczorek says. "That might happen, but only if we keep doing business in the same old ways."

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In California, we have the highest income taxes, gasoline taxes, and corporate taxes in the nation. The moneys go down an unfillable black hole that is located in our state capital, Sacramento, never to be seen again. Yet, I fully support the money for both fire and police to be taken out of my property and income taxes, and put into a special protected fund to cover those organizations that are critical for public safety and the stability of society. I would willingly pay even more for these services if I could be sure that the crooked politicians would keep their hands off the money, and not divert it to other areas. I believe this is a way to raise needed funds for these critical services, protect the funds from raids, "borrowing", and outright theft, and provide the critical support our police and fire need.

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protected fund....it will never ever ever ever happen. they will suck the money dry and just blow. therefore we can never give them what they want. Think CA Lottery and how that was supposed to save schools...that money goes into the general fund and as lost forever.

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Let there be no doubt that fire departments are learning lots from this economy. Most of the departments with which I am familiar have been data driven for years. Most departments have evolved from providing only fire suppression services to