

IG to fire department: Civilianize 34 jobs to save \$1.2 million a year

By Fran Spielman | Jan 20, 2016, 12:20pm CST



City of Chicago Inspector General Joe Ferguson | Sun-Times file photo

The Chicago Fire Department could save at least \$1.2 million a year and potentially millions more in overtime by hiring civilians to perform 34 administrative jobs that have nothing to do with firefighting or emergency medical service, Inspector General Joe Ferguson said Wednesday.

Three years after urging Mayor Rahm Emanuel to civilianize police jobs to save up to \$16.6 million a year and put another 292 police officers on the street, Ferguson outlined a similar cost-cutting recipe for the Chicago Fire Department.

After analyzing the duties and responsibilities of 555 uniformed firefighters and paramedics within the \$576.7 million-a-year Fire Department bureaucracy, Ferguson

recommended that Emanuel hire civilians to perform 34 of those jobs and eliminate the job of “commissary liaison” altogether.

That would save Chicago taxpayers at least \$1.2 million a year, reduce annual Fire Department overtime that has topped \$40 million in recent years and allow for a “more effective deployment of personnel to improve public safety outcomes” and response times to fire and medical emergencies, Ferguson said.

Two firefighters whose jobs were targeted for civilians actually served as mail carriers, even though their jobs were “not always documented in position descriptions or titles,” the inspector general concluded. The others were assigned to administrative duties, such as making certain that Fire Department scheduling complies with minimum staffing requirements mandated by the firefighters contract.

“The city makes a substantial investment in training firefighters and paramedics to be the best-in-class providers of critical public safety services,” Ferguson wrote in an audit released Wednesday.

“CFD does not make the most effective and efficient use of that specialized, taxpayer-subsidized training and expertise when it assigns a segment of its skilled ranks to administrative functions that could be performed by civilians.”

The fire department embraced Ferguson’s recommendation on 32 of the 35 targeted positions. Commissioner Jose Santiago further agreed to follow the inspector general’s recommendation to “assess all positions, monitor and track temporary assignments and ensure that job descriptions reflect actual responsibilities of uniformed positions.”

“There are likely to be more positions in CFD that could be civilianized,” Ferguson wrote, noting that New York and Philadelphia have civilians working as fire inspectors while Chicago still assigns those jobs to uniformed firefighters.

Such a periodic review has potential to save even more money, but only if the Chicago Firefighters Union Local 2 goes along.

During the audit, the Fire Department tried to get a head start by civilianizing some of the jobs Ferguson was targeting, including the two mail delivery positions. But Local 2 filed a grievance.

“Delivering mail has been Local 2 bargaining members for decades. This is a unilateral work rule change not negotiated with Local 2 . . . Stop this practice immediately and return this work to bargaining unit personnel,” the grievance stated.

Tom Ryan, president of the Chicago Firefighters Union Local 2, stood his ground.

“Mr. Ferguson is entitled to his opinion. But the positions referenced in his report are staffed by firefighters and paramedics and are essential to the efficient functioning of the Fire Department,” Ryan wrote in a text message to the Chicago Sun-Times.

“These jobs are covered under our current contract and, therefore, can only be discussed in negotiations.”

Ferguson’s audit also concluded that the fire department provided “at least 13 reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act either informally or without proper approval” by the disability officer in the city’s Department of Human Resources.

That’s even though the department “could not determine whether it had identified all uniformed members who had been granted accommodations.”

“Such accommodations effectively remove firefighters and paramedics from operations, so it is critical that CFD grant and track such accommodations systematically and in compliance with city policy,” Ferguson wrote in a letter to aldermen and the mayor that accompanied Wednesday’s audit.

It’s the second time in recent days that Ferguson has targeted the Chicago Fire Department for criticism.

Earlier this week, the inspector general concluded that at least 20 of the 111 black firefighters hired after a marathon discrimination lawsuit had not been medically cleared by a department physician before starting work and two of them “suffered serious medical events and died while off-duty.”

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