



Date: November 1, 2019

To: Thomas B. Modica, Acting City Manager *T.M.*

From: Xavier Espino, Fire Chief *X.E.*

For: Mayor and Members of the City Council

Subject: **Basic Life Support Ambulance Staffing**

Recent staffing shortages in the Long Beach Fire Department's (LBFD) Ambulance Operator position have caused a change in the staffing model for Basic Life Support (BLS) ambulance deployment. On October 18, 2019, after having met and conferred with both the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and the Long Beach Firefighters Association (FFA), the LBFD elected to stop using mandatory overtime for Ambulance Operators to staff one of the City's two day-time peak BLS units. In total, the City has three 24-hour BLS units, two day-time peak BLS units, and nine Advanced Life Support (ALS) units staffed by Firefighter/Paramedics. If full-time employees are available, or part-time employees have signed up to work, this unit will be staffed. This action was taken to provide temporary relief to the remaining full-time Ambulance Operators who were being required to work an excessive number of additional hours to fill these vacancies.

Background

The LBFD provides two transport methods for patients who have called 911 for a medical emergency. Critical patients, like those who are suffering a heart attack or a stroke and need immediate medical intervention, are transported to a local emergency room by Firefighter/Paramedics in one of the Fire Department's nine ALS Paramedic Rescues. These Paramedic Rescues are stationed throughout the city at Fire Stations 1, 3, 4, 13*, 10, 11, 12, 18, and 22. Patients who do not require immediate medical intervention by paramedics, but who require or request transport to a local emergency room, are transported by one of the LBFD's BLS ambulances. The BLS ambulances are staffed with non-sworn Ambulance Operators. Ambulance Operators hold an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) license and are either full-time or part-time employees that staff one of the five BLS ambulances. Three of the BLS ambulances are staffed for 24 hours a day and are currently housed at Fire Stations 2, 14, and 19**. Two of the BLS ambulances are peak-load units and are staffed during periods in which transports occur more frequently. Currently, a unit is housed at Fire Station 13 and is staffed from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. and one is housed at Fire Station 12 and is staffed from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. BLS ambulances are a citywide resource; therefore, even though each BLS unit is assigned to a specific Fire Station, the BLS units are out in the community more often than they are in their designated Fire Stations.

* Rescue 9 is currently housed at Fire Station 13 while a temporary location for Fire Station 9 is being located.

** BLS 16 is currently housed at Fire Station 19 while Engine 9 is temporarily housed at Fire Station 16.

The LBFD typically hires one class of Ambulance Operators per year. In past years, this class would graduate approximately 20 Ambulance Operators. This is typically enough to support the natural attrition that occurs in that classification. Ambulance Operators are hired through Civil Service. Applications are screened for qualifications and sent over to LBFD for review. Candidates are selected from that list and 60 or more are slated for LBFD interviews with Firefighters of various ranks. The top candidates are sent to Live Scan, a thorough background process, and a medical exam with Occupational Health before being offered a position. Once offered the position, Ambulance Operators complete a three-week course that covers internal LBFD policies and procedures, an EMT refresher, and Emergency Vehicle Operations. The Ambulance Operators also complete field orientation observation rotations with current ambulance operators. Part-time employees are offered full-time positions, in order of seniority or in order of their performance, in the Ambulance Operator class.

Staffing

Currently, the LBFD is experiencing a shortage of BLS personnel, as many fire departments are hiring for fire positions, in addition to ambulance operator companies. This shortage has limited the LBFD's ability to cover all shifts on the 12-hour BLS ambulances.

LBFD Ambulance Operator staffing fell to critical levels in September 2018. LBFD conducted a hiring process and 24 candidates began the background and medical exam process. Of the 24 candidates, only 13 completed the three-week orientation class. The others withdrew from the process, or were disqualified during the background, medical, or EMT refresher course. A second process was initiated in May 2019. In this process, 36 candidates began and a total of 20 candidates completed the process. The Civil Service list for this position expired and a new bulletin was published in June 2019. In August 2019, 60 candidates were interviewed and 36 were moved to backgrounds. As of today, 28 candidates remain in the process and those that complete backgrounds are being scheduled for medical exams. The background and medical exam portions of the process are typically slated for 10 weeks based on past experience. We are hopeful that we may be able to conduct a smaller class prior to the end of the year if we are able to move through the process quickly. If this is not the case, the class would take place in early January 2020.

Impacts

As mentioned above, BLS ambulances transport patients who do not require immediate medical intervention by a paramedic. When there are no BLS ambulances available, and a patient meeting these criteria requires transportation, an ALS unit is dispatched to provide transport. This places an ALS unit out of service during a period of typically 30-40 minutes. Other ALS units provide coverage in that unit's area while it is out of service.

To reduce the number of mandatory shifts the Ambulance Operators were covering, the department stopped filling mandatory overtime spots on BLS 12. This unit was selected because, of the five BLS ambulances, it has the lowest average call volume at 7 calls per shift. Additionally, it has two paramedic rescues nearby that provide overlapping coverage in the event one is out of service. Further, the LBFD proposes to rotate this reduction between BLS 12 and BLS 13 beginning in mid-November. It is anticipated that most of

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these calls will be absorbed by the other BLS units. If no BLS units are available, an ALS unit would have to fill in. Further, the recent restoration of Engine 17 provides an additional citywide resource to provide emergency medical services prior to the arrival of an ALS or BLS transport unit.

These reductions in daily staffing are temporary and will be in place until the LBFD is able to hire a sufficient number of Ambulance Operators, which is expected to occur in January 2020. During this period, LBFD will strive to maintain response times while continuing to meet the expectations of the community with regard to emergency medical services.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact me at (562) 570-2509.

XDE:JR:ARA

CC: CHARLES PARKIN, CITY ATTORNEY
LAURA L. DOUD, CITY AUDITOR
REBECCA GARNER, ACTING ASSISTANT CITY MANAGER
KEVIN JACKSON, DEPUTY CITY MANAGER
TERESA CHANDLER, INTERIM DEPUTY CITY MANAGER
ANDREW VIALPANDO, ACTING ADMINISTRATIVE DEPUTY TO THE CITY MANAGER