

Date: April 28, 2023

To: Thomas B. Modica, City Manager



From: Dennis Buchanan, Fire Chief



For: Mayor and Members of City Council

Subject: **Overview of the Fire Department's Staffing Levels and Strategic Solutions**

On April 18, 2023, the Long Beach Fire Department (LBFD) presented to the [Public Safety Committee](#) a summary of the department's staffing levels, challenges, and opportunities related to the department's sworn Fire personnel. This memorandum will complement the presentation provided to the Public Safety Committee.

Fire Department Operations Overview

The LBFD is proud to serve the complex, diverse, and dynamic needs of the Long Beach community. LBFD provides many unique fire services through its highly trained sworn fire personnel to address fire safety, emergency services, delivery of emergency medical services, marine safety, hazardous materials mitigation, urban search and rescue, and fire safety and response services for the Port of Long Beach and the Long Beach Airport.

LBFD operates 23 fire stations, 20 fire engines, four fire ladder trucks, nine paramedic rescue ambulances, and five basic life support ambulances. In addition to these core fire services, LBFD provides lifeguard services from 10 lifeguard facilities, eight beach rescue units, six fire/lifeguard rescue dive boats, and one swift water rescue unit. Collectively, these fire services are supported by LBFD to ensure the safety of the Long Beach community in all spaces and places in the City of Long Beach's (City) geographical footprint.

Budgeted Staffing Levels

LBFD delivers emergency response services through the sworn fire classifications listed in Table 1. These positions are responsible for staffing the department's fire stations and providing immediate emergency response to 911 calls reporting active fire and medical emergencies.

Table 1: FY 23 Budgeted Sworn Fire Positions

Rank	FY 23 Budgeted Positions
Sworn Fire Managers	7
Battalion Chief	12
Fire Captain	85
Fire Engineer	84
Firefighter - Paramedic	90
Firefighter	119
Total Sworn Fire Personnel	397

Of these positions, the Battalion Chiefs and Fire Captains provide supervisory functions in the Long Beach Fire Department over front-line fire emergency response services. Fire Engineers are responsible for operating the department's fire apparatus and complex equipment needs when responding to 911 calls. Firefighters who complete State mandated training and have obtained their paramedic license receive specialty paramedic pay and are assigned to Advance Life Support units. Firefighters represent the entry-level position among the fire sworn classifications and ranks.

As described in its [memorandum](#) dated April 13, 2023, regarding the department's Basic Life Support services, the LBFD also employs civilian Ambulance Operators to provide this category of ambulance services. The department is budgeted for 26 full-time equivalent employees in the Ambulance Operator classification.

Current Occupational Trends Impacting Fire Sworn Staffing Levels

A number of factors result in fire sworn attrition. For many years, the most common reason for sworn fire employee attrition was service retirement which surges and stabilizes depending on the age composition of the LBFD fire sworn workforce. As demonstrated below in Table 2, a growing factor in fire sworn attrition are resignations stemming from employee relocation, seeking other employment or other personal reasons. Year-to-date in 2023, the department continues to experience resignations, including personnel seeking employment at other Fire department agencies or relocating to other communities. LBFD is also experiencing a high rate of attrition of its classified Ambulance Operator personnel. Table 3 shows the six recent cohorts of classified Ambulance Operators.

Table 2: Five-Year Summary of Fire Sworn Attrition

Reason	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Resignation	1	2	1	6	7	17
Service Retirement	16	9	8	9	8	50
Probationary Dismissal or Discipline Related	2	3	3	0	2	10
Dismissal	1	0	0	0	0	1
Deceased	1	1	0	0	1	3
Industrial Disability	0	1	0	3	0	4
Total	21	16	12	18	18	85
Resignations include the employee seeking other employment, resigning due to personal reasons, or relocating.						

Table 3: Three-Year Summary of Ambulance Operator Attrition

Reason	2020	2021	2022	Total
Resigned	55	15	13	83

Leaves, Injuries and Mandatory Training Impacting In-Service Staffing Levels

In addition to ongoing attrition and new reasons for fire sworn employee attrition, several occupational workplace trends reduce the number of fire sworn personnel who can be placed in-service for 911 response.

As mentioned in this memorandum, it is critical to send members of the firefighter classification to a multi-month paramedic training program that requires successfully passing multiple exams to receive the paramedic license. Accordingly, a significant number of firefighters must be pulled from 911 response service to participate in this training. Currently, LBFD has 20 firefighters participating in paramedic training school, which reduces staffing among the fire stations.

In addition to mandatory training, currently 9.3 percent of fire sworn personnel cannot be placed in 911 response service due to a variety of medical or occupational health limitations. Due to workplace restrictions set by a medical professional, the department is experiencing between 30 to 40 fire sworn staff unable to work frontline shifts at one of the department's 23 fire stations.

Utilizing Mandatory Overtime to Sustain 24/7 Fire Services

LBFD operates on a 24/7 shift model that relies on 128 fire sworn positions being staffed daily by battalion chiefs, fire captains, fire engineers, firefighter paramedics and firefighters. The cumulative effect of vacancies, mandatory training, and medical/occupational health leaves can lead to strain on the remaining workforce. On average, frontline fire sworn personnel are assigned to work a standard of ten 24-hour shifts per month. However, due to the factors listed above that reduce available staff, firefighters are currently required to work five extra shifts of 24-hours every month. This results in the City's firefighters working 120 hours of extra overtime per month, totaling 374 hours worked per month to sustain the department's 24-hour and 23-station workload model. For firefighter paramedics, this employee group is projected to work the baseline of ten 24-hour shifts plus four additional 24-hour shifts per month. This results in the firefighter paramedic employee group working 336 hours per month, inclusive of regular and overtime shifts. As a comparison, the average work hours commonly worked by non-public safety personnel of 174 hours per month (i.e., 2,088 hours divided by 12 months).

The heavy reliance on overtime can result in straining the City's fire work force through physical and mental health burnout, the development of injuries or health conditions that make field work challenging, or employee interest in pursuing another career or other organizations.

Regional Trends

California and other neighboring fire departments are experiencing similar struggles with hiring new firefighters and retaining both firefighters and firefighter paramedics. A scan of the region and key case studies are provided below that summarize the regional shortage of fire sworn personnel, the surge of firefighter hiring efforts, as well as the growing competition among agencies in hiring and filling vacancies.

In March 2023, executive management at Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) reported increasing workload and declining fire sworn resources. Due to this challenge, LAFD recently requested to fund an additional five fire academies on top of the existing five to bolster LAFD staffing by 300 additional personnel.

In early 2022, the San Diego Fire Chief reported to local media that declining staffing has impeded San Diego's ability to send personnel to mutual aid wildfire events. San Diego is also experiencing a decrease in firefighter applicants, down from an average of 4,000 applicants per year to 1,300 in recent years. Similar to Long Beach, San Diego is pursuing aggressive recruitment efforts at local high schools, community colleges and athletic programs and are also seeking to diversify the department. San Diego is another large neighboring agency that will increase fire recruit academies to three academies per year in lieu of the traditional two annual fire recruit academies.

Traditionally, firefighters are trained or sponsored by their home departments to acquire their paramedic licenses. A new trend is more agencies recruiting for lateral firefighter paramedics, especially among large California departments. Agencies such as the San Jose Fire Department, Los Angeles County Fire Department, City of Oceanside, City of Manhattan

Beach, City of Riverside, City of Ventura, and several additional agencies operated recruitments to hire seasoned fire personnel who currently hold State of California firefighter and paramedic certifications.

Other regional trends shared among dozens of California fire departments point to new factors such as an increase of fire sworn workplace physical and mental health injuries as well as overall decreased interest in fire sworn personnel working shifts vacancies caused by vacations, injuries, and other employee leaves.

Fire Management has developed a number of solutions to address current challenges and position us better for the future. The following strategies are outlined below.

Strategic Solutions

- **Financial investment for a larger Fire Recruit Academy:** The Fire Department is currently preparing to start its upcoming Fire Recruit Academy, termed 2023A, with a starting goal to onboard 48 recruits in August of 2023. This is double the size of a traditional fire recruit academy. While some recruits naturally attrit out of the Academy process, the department is proactively implementing many adjustments and programs to ensure a high level of recruit success through the Academy to bolster the Firefighter staffing levels when the class graduates in December 2023. The City Manager will bring a financial proposal to the City Council to fund this super-sized academy. It is estimated that it will cost an additional \$2.1 million in one-time support to fund the academy, and the City Manager is proposing to fund it through a potential combination of year-end savings and Measure A one-time support.
- **Intentional Outreach to Participants in LBFD's Pathway Programs:** LBFD is continuing its outreach and partnership with several community and local educational partners to promote a career pipeline to the fire service that reflects the diversity of the community. Among already employed Ambulance Operators, LBFD provided additional support sessions to help Ambulance Operators pass the Physical Agility Test, which is part of the Fire Recruit classification recruitment. Ambulance Operators were also provided education on how to prepare for Fire Recruit interview and participated in mock interviews.

Long-term outreach efforts include the Jordan High School Fire Pathway Program and the Future Firefighter Development Program. Both programs engage local high schoolers to learn about the college curriculum related to fire service and exposure to FD's operations and organization.

Lastly, the department continues to host its Female Firefighter Workshop that includes intentional outreach, engagement and recruitment to women interested in the fire service.

- **Paramedic Training Concluding:** While it is challenging to release personnel to attend multi-month paramedic training, as the 20 firefighter paramedic trainees obtain their

licenses, it will bolster the number of paramedic personnel. This will provide relief to the current cohort of employees. It is forecasted that by the end of summer 2023, 15 new paramedics will be available to be placed in service.

- **Partnering with FFA to explore backfilling Paramedic shifts with alternate classifications:** Fire Captains, which is the first supervisory fire sworn rank, who still possess a valid Paramedic license, may work as Paramedic Rescue Relief. This assists with reducing some 24-hour shifts that are vacant and alleviates the total number of mandatory callbacks needed to sustain ALS Rescue service. The department continues to explore the ability to allow the same opportunity on Paramedic Assessment Units (PAUs), which may involve meet and confer, to create temporary measures to allow other classifications who possess Paramedic licenses to assist in filling vacancies until staffing levels return to normal.
- **Researching Paramedic Alternative Response Models:** The department is researching and exploring alternative response models for ALS services. Some concepts include assessing the efficiency of paramedic engines and trucks. Additional concepts include exploring the benefit of single-function paramedics, ALS squads (which is the current model for the Los Angeles County Fire Department) and assessing additional peak hour ALS Rescues (in-service from 0800 to 2000).
- **Cross-filling Ambulance Operator position:** To address BLS shortages, the Fire Department has reached an agreement with IAMAW and LGA to a temporary cross-fill Lifeguards into the Ambulance Operators position until June 16, 2023, while LBFD anticipates finalizing the current hiring process. This will allow the LBFD to staff the agreed amount of three (3) 24-hour BLS Units and two (2) 12-hour BLS Units daily. This great partnership will begin next week, and provide significantly more staffing. While the total number of BLS operators graduating from the Academy is unknown (as these candidates are currently undergoing the onboarding process), as of this memo there are 34 candidates participating in the background check process. As with any recruitment, this number may be reduced as candidates self-remove or do not pass the background check, Occupational Health, live scan or the Academy processes.
- **Ambulance Patient Off-loading Delays (APODs):** APODs significantly reduce the FD's effectiveness and operational efficiencies. APOD is a common term that describes the time Ambulance Operators and fire sworn staff spend transferring a patient to a hospital organization, most often to a hospital emergency room (ER). Due to hospital staffing shortages, LBFD staff are spending increased time at ERs waiting for a patient to transfer from LBFD care to hospital care. Over the past six months, nearly 35 percent of BLS patients transported by BLS units have yielded an APOD greater than 45 minutes.

To address this issue, the LBFD is submitting to each local hospital their organization's APOD wait times every three days to ensure open communication related to this issue. Additionally, the FD meets with all area hospitals quarterly and APODs are a standing agenda item. FD has initiated meetings with local hospital management, including the

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CEO level requesting local hospitals hire additional ER staff with the goal of reducing APODs in the Long Beach community. Lastly, the City is submitting a letter of support for Assembly Bill 40, which proposes implementing a 30-minute standard APOD for 90 percent of patients received by local hospitals and other emergency room locations.

Unless the City Manager receives alternative direction from the full Mayor and City Council, we will be putting these actions into place, which are expected to significantly help the staffing challenges in the Fire Department. The City Manager will bring the financial solution for the super-sized Academy to the City Council for approval, but in order to have a 48-person Academy, the Fire Department will immediately begin planning.

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

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