

Civilianization

Findings

Uniformed personnel are assigned to many functions which do not require fire suppression experience and which could be performed by civilian personnel.

Discussion

The department's traditional practice of assigning and promoting from within has resulted in uniformed personnel performing many functions not requiring fire suppression experience and abilities. All bureaus, with the exception of Forestry, have Fire Protection Series personnel performing functions that should more properly be performed by civilians. We have identified 123 such positions as candidates for civilianization (see Exhibit B); these positions are currently occupied by personnel in classes ranging from Fire-fighter Specialist to Deputy Chief. The Department of Personnel concurs, has made similar findings, and has identified, in more detail, essentially the same positions for civilianization; their recommendations are found on page ___ of this report.

The department has recognized the need for and has already requested from the Department of Personnel, the civilianization of a number of fire protection engineering positions in the Fire Prevention Bureau. The Department of Personnel is currently reviewing the classes for appropriate allocation.

Our study indicates that the fire suppression capabilities of the department would not be adversely affected by the civilianization of all of these positions and that the department's overall operation would be improved. Additionally, supervisory ratios may be expanded.

Civilianization of the positions listed in Exhibit B would reduce the high turnover rate in technical and administrative functions, and introduce job continuity and a higher degree of expertise and functional stability to the affected bureaus. As civilians are not under the formal "bid system" available to firefighters, a professional movement through the positions would be less frequent. (A firefighter may bid into any position for which he qualifies, once he has served a minimum of six months in his present position.) We found that in order to enhance their promotability, many firefighters transfer through as many assignments as possible; many positions considered undesirable by firefighter personnel often require direct assignment. Civilianization will enhance the stability of those positions while reducing current assignment problems. For example: The turnover rate of the Los Angeles Dispatch Center has been 75 percent during the past one and one-half years (since January 1978). The dispatch position is a bid position, requiring a one-year assignment. It takes one year on-the-job training to become a proficient dispatcher. Civilianization of these positions would bring stability to the function and release firefighter personnel to perform and train in their primary mission. Because this assignment is negatively viewed by field personnel and because it takes firefighters out of the mainstream of the department, both Captains and firefighters do not readily bid for vacant dispatcher positions. Consequently, firefighters frequently are detailed into dispatcher positions and are frozen in when attempting to bid out.

Civilianization will allow the department to recruit individuals with expertise specifically related to the functions involved. For example, instead of limiting recruitment for the head of the Administrative Services Bureau to a uniformed candidate, the department can seek an individual with expertise in the full range of County administration and management; this holds true for every office within the bureau.

Again, the performance and assignment stability of each office would be improved by enlarging the recruitment base beyond firefighting ability.

The removal of uniformed fire suppression personnel from civilian-type jobs will benefit the department by allowing those personnel to remain active in fire suppression and, in that way, keep or improve their firefighting skills.

Finally, civilianization will be cost effective. We expect the conversion of uniformed positions to civilians will reduce both salary and service and supply costs to the department and safety retirement costs to the County. Estimated annual salary savings of approximately \$800,000 could result from civilianization of all 123 positions; these savings could be used to fund other programs at the fire camps and Forester nurseries which are currently undermanned.

The proposed civilianization will be a long and complex process, and more intensive studies may show that a few positions on the proposed list do require some expertise in fire science, e.g., petrochemical inspectors. A long range plan for civilianization should be developed with phased implementation: 1) those changes that can

be accomplished without unusual delay; 2) those changes that can be accomplished within a year; and 3) those changes that will take longer than one year to accomplish. Civilianization can effectively be accomplished through attrition or transfers to vacant budgeted positions in other bureaus.

The Department of Personnel will give priority to the purpose of allocating the proper classification and compensation for each affected position; allocations will include a review of supervision ratios. The Chief Administrative Office will provide the assistance needed to ensure a smooth transition to civilianization.

Recommendation

12. Develop and implement a plan for civilianization of the 123 positions identified in Exhibit B to this audit report.