



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published September 10th, 2014

An Expectation of Inconvenience

By Nick Marnell

The mere mention of the word overtime in the context of the fire service can bring on arrhythmia. Management does not want to force overtime on its firefighters. In many cases the firefighters do not want to work so much overtime. The public has reacted with outrage over firefighter overtime pay. But overtime is a fact of firefighting life, and it has lately morphed from a nuisance to a near crisis.

"One of the first things I tell our recruits is to prepare to give up your evenings, weekends and holidays," said Moraga-Orinda Fire District chief Stephen Healy. "And you'll be missing a lot of birthdays and special family occasions. I advise them that this job has a built-in expectation of inconvenience, which includes working overtime."

Both MOFD and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District use a constant staffing model, covering a week with three 56-hour shifts of three-person engine companies per fire station. All 56 hours are paid at regular time. (Additionally, ConFire employs three training captains and MOFD staffs its own ambulances.) ConFire has 26 vacancies for its 210 positions while MOFD is two short of a complete staff of 57. Filling those open slots and absences requires overtime. In fiscal year 2013-14, ConFire paid \$9.5 million in overtime; MOFD, \$1.5 million.

"You don't down-staff to cover vacancies," said Vince Wells, Local 1230 president. "But I get concerned when overtime is so excessive that the firefighters don't want to work and you're forcing them to." And they are forced to, though they may trade off their shifts. Turning down mandatory overtime outright is a refusal of a direct order and is subject to disciplinary action.

ConFire chief Jeff Carman is also concerned that his firefighters are working excessive mandatory overtime. "They're sometimes working 120 consecutive hours in order to keep our companies in service," he said. "I worry about a wrong decision or an injury."

Some fire districts carry extra people on the books for fill-in, but that business model is more expensive. "It's 26 percent cheaper to pay overtime than to add personnel," said Carman, though the district has just completed a training academy and has scheduled one more this fall to help fill vacancies. Healy said that the payroll percentage saved by paying overtime is similar in his district. "I'd much rather the districts hire more firefighters," said Wells, who noted that in the East Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, the firefighters have had enough. "Because of the demands of excessive overtime, the district is closing a station. The situation was jeopardizing the health and safety of the firefighters."

Both Lamorinda fire agencies maintain a list of personnel available to work voluntary overtime, but the ConFire list is not long enough to fill the vacancies.

"I'm thinking I'm getting off at 8 (a.m.), but I get a notice of a mandatory and I'm not going anywhere," said ConFire captain Maurice Howell. "That's because only 18 guys signed up for 27 openings. There's no one to relieve you."

Howell said he was warned early in his career about the overtime trap. "I've been mando'd on my kid's birthday," said the Lafayette resident. "But to me, the biggest thing? The family dinners missed." He said it is a challenge to spend quality time at home. "The wife acts as a single parent. I try to parent by phone, but it's not the same. I try to make the most of my days off with the family, but my wife has a routine of her own. I come home, and I disrupt it."

"It takes a strong spouse," added MOFD captain Tony Perry. "The spouse is part of the process. I will tell you, this job is affecting a new relationship I'm in."

Second jobs are no longer as prevalent among firefighters. "This is my second job," said Howell, who worked more than 3,600 hours in 2013. After their July pay cut, many MOFD firefighters count on the overtime. "I'm one of the highest paid firefighters in the district, and I still need the overtime," said Perry. "We're grateful to have it."

"But to go home to our families after a shift, that's what it's all about," said Howell. "The money doesn't hurt, but there's nothing like sleeping at home."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA