

Enhancing Diversity in the Fire Service Doesn't Mean Lowering Standards

We must insist that each and every recruit meets or exceeds the standards set for their positions

By Timothy E. Sendelbach

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It's a speech I had given many times before: the welcoming speech given on the first day of a firefighter recruit academy. As I looked in the eyes of 25 young men and women who sat with anxious anticipation of what the next 15 weeks would bring, some stared back with fear; others gleamed with excitement and passion. I welcomed each of them to the fire service, but not to our fire department family, as this is reserved for those who demonstrate the physical and mental competencies of an entry-level firefighter.

A **recent article in the *New York Post*** that describes an excessively high failure rate for the latest FDNY recruit class caused me to reflect back on the many recruits I've welcomed to our ranks—and on the less fortunate to whom I've said thanks, but no thanks.

The current FDNY recruit class has a restricted enrollment; it's limited to city EMTs and paramedics, which, based on their make-up, fulfills the mandate to employ more minorities. The frightening part of the article is not the excessively high failure rate (some of the recruits are considerably older), but rather the fact that the department was potentially directed to lower the physical and academic requirements of the academy. Trying to fill our ranks with a membership that represents our community, or with individuals who carry a certain level of expertise (e.g., lateral firefighters, paramedics) is nothing new, nor is it something any of us should frown upon. Yet we must never lose sight of the importance of the minimum requirements we set forth for the positions within our organization.

In 2003, I was hired as an outsider to serve as the chief of training for a moderately sized paid department that, at the time, was in the process of hiring a number of new firefighters. During one of my first meetings with the rank-and-file members, I opened up the floor for questions and comments related to the department's training program. It wasn't long before the longstanding frustrations of the department rose to the surface. A loud voice from the back the room said, "Chief, all we want is for the recruits to be capable of catching a hydrant before they graduate the academy."

Shocked as you might imagine by such a simple request, I quickly vowed to the members that every recruit would, without question, be competent and capable of catching a hydrant upon graduation. Hearing additional challenges that they had faced with recruits in years past, I took it a step further. I promised them that any recruit who walked across the stage at graduation

would have my full support, and that no one would cross that stage not having met or exceeded the department's minimum standards.

I made that promise because our members deserved nothing less. Their expectations were that the man or woman who rode beside them, stood behind them, or led them during late-night battles MUST be competent, physically capable and willing to perform the task at hand. When quantity overshadows quality within our ranks, we begin to destroy the foundation of our safety and success.

Firefighters are without question a select breed, a breed not limited to a specific ethnicity, gender or education level. It's a breed of impassioned individuals driven by a singular mission—to serve and to protect. When we seek to initiate new members into our ranks, it is this passion, this dedication that we must strive to maintain.

As a firefighter reading the New York Post article, I became incredibly frustrated by what appears to be a destructive directive imposed by an ill-informed outsider on what many of us would call a model organization. Yet I understand that backlash toward the decision-makers and the candidates won't solve anything.

The next time your department welcomes a recruit academy, ask yourself this: Do our public officials and the citizens we serve truly understand the duties and responsibilities of a firefighter? If questioned, are we prepared to defend our methodologies against the strictest national standards and recognized best practices? Can we effectively demonstrate and document the efforts we have made to recruit, employ and retain qualified candidates of all genders, ethnic backgrounds, etc.? And equally such, can we prove that the physical standards we've imposed upon those who seek to become members of our organization are fair and equal to all?

Equality is a two-way street and we must never lose sight of the fact that it is our responsibility to develop and maintain training practices and minimum standards that support the same.



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Diversity in the Fire Service: A Problem or a Solution?

JOHN J. McNEIL

10/01/2008

The concept of diversity in the fire service can be thought of in different ways. Diversity considerations can range from cultural (nationality, religion, and language) to subcultural (age, gender, and community) to individual (personal traits and learning styles). Perspectives regarding the impact of diversity in the fire service vary from causing adversity and ineffectiveness in the organization to providing a position of strength and success through collective intelligence. No matter what your perspective may be on diversity, it is an issue that can evoke emotions.

THE PROBLEM

Some perceive diversity in the fire service as a management nightmare. The idea of bringing together people of different nationalities, languages, religious beliefs, ages, genders, sexual orientation, and personalities to work effectively and accomplish something seems to be impossible and ridiculous. The diversification of members within an organization can be further complicated and convoluted by mixtures of cultures within cultures such as African-American Catholic or gay Asian. The potential cultural barriers in the fire service seem to be insurmountable. Conflicts and misunderstandings caused by different languages, cultural idiosyncrasies, learning styles, education levels, and religious beliefs could paralyze a department or make it ineffective.

To further complicate the issue of ensuring diversity in an organization, the strategy of hiring more minorities to balance out the organization's membership only seems to complicate matters even more. A survey conducted in 1993 by L.H. Research for the National Conference of Christians and Jews found that black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans resent one another almost as much as they do Caucasians. It seems that perhaps it would make better sense to hire a homogeneous group of members or employees to work together within an organization and avoid all of the miscommunication and cultural barriers diversity creates and that impede productivity and efficiency. Perhaps the intent of the concept of promoting diversity in the workplace could be summed up in the words of George Schuyler, author of *Black No More*:

Like most men with a vision, a plan, a program or a remedy, he fondly imagined a person to be intelligent enough to accept a good thing when it was offered to them, which was conclusive evidence that he knew little about the human race.

To complicate matters further, many fire service leaders mistakenly believe that lowering the various fire service hiring standards is necessary to attain diversity in their department. This lowering of standards creates resentment in incumbent firefighters and concern for firefighter safety as well as diminishes the highly respected firefighter status.

The problematic perspective of diversity in an organization presents legitimate concerns regarding the hiring for diversity as well as the barriers and ensuing negative repercussions that result from differences in language, age, culture, religious belief, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender. These barriers, intermingled with personal bias and the prejudices of organization members, can ultimately affect an organization's communication and effectiveness.

THE ADVANTAGE

Others perceive diversity in the fire service as the means of survival in a growing diverse country. The leveraging of diversity can mean using cultural differences to accomplish organizational goals not feasible in a culturally homogeneous department. It would seem to make tremendous sense for fire departments to seek a diverse workforce to eliminate language and cultural barriers that might otherwise exist with the diverse communities they now seek to serve. The collective intelligence of a diverse organization allows for many perspectives and different strengths in effectively meeting the department's goals.

Just as a government and its elected officials and leadership should reflect the demographics of their constituents to ensure that all are represented in decision making, so, too, it is important that government agencies, such as the fire service, be representative of the citizens they serve. The demographics of the service providers should be such that the citizens feel that their culture, language, and beliefs are respected and understood when they are in need of services. It is interesting to note when discussing diversity in services provided by the public sector that public safety, and particularly the fire service, remains significantly behind in diversity in the workforce. As a member of the fire service, I believe that addressing the issue of diversity is one of the greatest challenges or complicated issues a chief faces today.

According to 2003 U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, the fire service workforce was the least diverse of any protective service occupation. According to information reported about the protective services, which includes police officers, security officers, and firefighters, firefighters have the lowest percentages of employed women and African Americans and the second lowest percentage of employed Asians and Hispanics.

A positive perspective on diversity in the fire service presents legitimate advantages relative to the very same barriers presented by the problematic perspective. Based on my research, I believe that the information presented on the two perspectives pertaining to the impact of diversity in organizations is accurate. It is the responsibility of the organization's leaders to meet the challenges diversity in the workplace might present to obtain the advantages diversity could offer.

THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERS

Achieving diversity in the fire service requires that fire service leaders commit seriously to actively recruit in arenas that will provide qualified minority applicants without lowering any standards. College campuses, the military service (experienced members), and fitness/wellness

centers are examples of potential sources of qualified and successful firefighter applicants. Additionally, leaders and recruiters have to be willing to approach minorities with an equally positive and personal approach in recruitment as was used in recruiting the incumbent firefighters. An equally serious effort must be provided in the form of a mentoring program prior to the physical ability testing for both men and women. This will increase the prospect of success for applicants who may struggle in the physical ability aspect of the hiring process without compromising the standard.

Many leaders of America's fire service grew up in segregated communities and had limited opportunity to interact with different cultures or peoples. Many have internalized all the stereotypical beliefs about race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality that exist in society and the organizations. The leaders themselves are part of the challenge and are not properly prepared to address the issues that might exist in a diverse workforce in fire service organizations in the future. The dramatic changes and challenges of diversity entail integration of all workers based on not only social justice but also the need to effectively meet the community's needs.

Fire service leaders must embrace diversity and recognize its importance. They should assess their attitudes, assumptions, and feelings about people who differ from them and the effect of these beliefs on their effectiveness as leaders. They must work to change any negative attitudes—theirs and others'.

They can accomplish this through networking and exposure to people of different backgrounds. Leaders should learn to engage and use the contributions and talents of the culturally diverse members inside and outside their organization. In doing this, they will serve as models for their members. The behavior leaders demonstrate will in turn begin to change not only their negative attitudes and misconceptions but also those of their members. After assessing their attitudes and behaviors, the leaders should assess the organization's readiness to meet the challenges of diversity and build an attitude that illustrates a degree of readiness to accept a culturally diverse organization.

Leaders who are familiar with the various approaches to changing antidiversity attitudes are better able to manage diversity. As a point of information, usually employing logic is not effective in changing the attitude. It is difficult to find examples that show a change in an antidiversity attitude that came about as a result of a logical argument or additional information. It has been found, instead, that the employees tend to hide their attitudes and pretend to have been converted.

Diversity training can help begin the process of leaders and department members' meeting the challenge. Classroom demonstration, work groups, problem analysis, role playing, and video presentations are useful techniques in diversity workshops.

These techniques help members to understand differences among cultures. It is preferable and less contentious in an organization when the leaders and members are prepared and committed to the value of a diverse organization before the organization's diversification. Nonetheless, if a department is already diverse and struggling with these challenges, it is never too late to begin the process of understanding and accepting the importance of diversity in an organization.

It is imperative that the leaders assist members with diverse backgrounds to succeed, recruit, and promote a diverse workforce and use the potential and talents derived from diversity.

The challenge of diversity in the fire service does not end with the acceptance of minority hiring but continues on throughout your career with equal opportunity in promotions, assignments, and a harassment-free environment. Accountability of officers and supervisors in the commitment to bias-free performance-based treatment of all subordinates must be maintained through chief officers' monitoring their performance.

Fire service leaders should immediately address bias behaviors based on such stereotypes such as gender, race, nationality, or religion in hiring, assignments, promotions, or daily duties and life in the firehouse or workplace in a manner so that others can see the intolerance for such inappropriate behavior.

Leaders face challenges when introducing or addressing diversity, but their success is critical to the success of the organization. The strength of an organization rests in its greatest resource—its people. Leadership cannot accomplish any of the organizational goals without the employees' uniting to accomplish the work.

The more talent, skills, perspectives, insight, knowledge, and abilities acquired through diversity, the stronger and more effective and competitive the organization will be. In our multicultural society, positively integrating this necessary diverse workforce and meeting the inherent challenges are the duties of leadership.

JOHN J. McNEIL retired as deputy chief from the Atlanta (GA) Fire Rescue Department, where he served 27 years. During his tenure, he served as deputy chief of the Technical Services Division, assistant chief of training, and battalion chief; he has 20 years of experience in field operations. While assistant chief of training, McNeil was responsible for the hiring and training of fire recruits for the department.

For New York City Fire Department, More Diversity Amid Tension

The first class of New York Fire Department recruits who were accepted after a court mandate on diversity will graduate Thursday.

By **MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ**

Published: December 4, 2013

By now, the 242 recruits at the New York City Fire Department's training academy have climbed hundreds of flights of stairs carrying at least 100 pounds of gear.

They have rushed into burning buildings, smoke-filled subway cars and a bombed-out Metropolitan Transportation Authority bus.



A Rise in Diversity

Generations of firefighters have endured this rite of passage, but this group is different. When the class graduates on Thursday, it will be the most diverse in the city's history, with minorities making up 62 percent of it. The change is a result of a federal judge's order that the city reform the hiring practices of a department that was nearly 90 percent white.

Some of the recruits are older than has been typical of previous classes, and some have struggled. Injuries are up and the dropout rate, usually 10 percent, is 24 percent for the current class, officials said. But when the new recruits — known as probationary firefighters or probies — arrive at their assigned firehouses, many of them could face an even bigger challenge.

There is animosity and skepticism inside at least some of the city's more than 200 fire stations. Some firefighters view the court requirements as a quota system that sacrifices safety for the sake of diversity.

Tensions are high enough that the judge who ordered the reforms has been under police protection at his home, and the fire commissioner, Salvatore J. Cassano, took the extraordinary step of dispatching commanders to firehouses to make sure the new arrivals were not mistreated.

“We will not tolerate retaliation; we will not tolerate people not being treated with dignity and respect,” Commissioner Cassano said in an interview. “That message was out there loud and clear.”

The new firefighters are wading into a knotty experiment to transform one of the most visible vestiges of racial discrimination in the city.

The department has spent years creating a new entrance exam and reforming its recruiting and hiring practices. The goal is to make the department, 148 years old, more of a reflection of the diverse city it serves.

At a time when racially charged court battles continue over the Police Department’s stop-and-frisk practice, the Fire Department’s experiment may provide a measure of the limits and possibilities of court-ordered remedies to discriminatory practices by local governments.

For the recruits, the 18 weeks of training represented a chance to join an elite and insular club: the job, as it is known to those who cherish the excitement and fraternity along with a pay package that rises to about \$100,000 after five years from about \$43,000 in the first year.

In interviews, several of the trainees said they were aware of the heightened scrutiny of their class. But any trepidation seemed overshadowed by unreserved enthusiasm.

“Who doesn’t want to be a superhero?” said Stephen Howard, 35, one of the recruits. “It’s something that’s looked at in awe by everyone, all boys and girls. You see that red truck, guys in the cool suits and say, ‘I want to do that when I grow up.’ ”

The Fire Department changes stem from [a 2009 ruling by a federal judge](#), Nicholas G. Garaufis of Federal District Court in Brooklyn, who found that the city used exams that discriminated against black and Hispanic applicants.

The judge ruled that the exams given in 1999 and 2002 had disparate impact, a legal term applied to employment practices that adversely affect specific minorities. In this case, the white applicants’ performing significantly better than minority applicants was evidence of bias.

Judge Garaufis ordered the city to create a new entrance exam and appointed an independent monitor to oversee changes in recruiting, testing and hiring. Most controversially, Judge Garaufis required the department to give a second chance to some minority recruits, including some who had failed exams, in 1999 or 2002, that were found to be biased. For those recruits, the department was required to waive the maximum age of 29 for taking the entry exam and to

provide back pay and salaries commensurate with the time they would have put in had they been hired earlier.

The current class includes 76 of these recruits, known as priority hires, who will enter the firehouses for the first time after graduation on Dec. 5. Many of them will be older than colleagues, and some will have higher pay.

Paul Mannix, a deputy chief and a fire commander in the Bronx who leads a group opposing the reforms, said that while he was pleased to see the new recruits held to a rigorous standard at the academy, the inclusion of priority hires was unfair and was harming morale.

“There’s a corrosive and toxic atmosphere that’s being created in the Fire Department at this time because of the preferential treatment that is going on,” he said.

To dispel what the department describes as misinformation surrounding the new class, officials allowed a reporter to interview and observe recruits over several weeks at the Rock, the Fire Department’s sprawling training center on Randalls Island.

Those interviewed included military veterans, former emergency medical workers and other city workers. Some traced their passion for the job to childhood. Others were inspired by the Sept. 11 terrorist attack, which killed 343 New York City firefighters.

Most said they were unaware of the litigation until the application forms arrived. But they said they were prepared to be thrust into an important experiment.

Dwayne Hill, 34, is a former combat engineer in the Army. He passed the 2002 entrance exam, but was called to active duty before he could reach the academy. After a year in Iraq clearing mines, Mr. Hill, who is African-American, returned to find he had missed the opportunity to join the department.

The court order has given him a second chance. He dismissed concerns that he and others were receiving special treatment.

“I’m fortunate, I’m blessed and I’m here just to learn as a probie,” he said. Each of the recruits, including the priority hires, were required to pass a new entrance exam and a background check. To graduate, recruits must run a timed obstacle course that includes sprinting up a five-story fire escape, hauling hoses, hoisting ladders and dragging around 160-pound mannequins.

Attempts to change the racial makeup of the Fire Department stretch back decades.

In 1973 a judge ordered the city to hire one black firefighter for every three white ones. That effort failed. The latest round of litigation began in 2007, when the Justice Department sued New York City based on complaints by the Vulcan Society, a black firefighters group, of racial bias.

Elsewhere, such efforts have had varying outcomes. In 2002, a federal judge ruled that the Los Angeles Fire Department was sufficiently diverse and ended a 1974 order requiring half of all recruits to be minorities. In 2009, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a group of white firefighters from New Haven, Conn., who argued that scrapping a test they had passed on the basis that it discriminated against minorities was itself discrimination.

John Coombs, the president of the Vulcan Society, said it would probably take years before the results from this latest effort are known. He said he had heard complaints from some recruits about racially tinged taunting at the academy. (None of the recruits interviewed said they ever felt disrespected.) “I’m not dissatisfied, I’m just waiting for the results,” said Mr. Coombs.

The department insists that with the new class, it has turned a significant corner.

There has already been some success: As of October 2013, there were 1,230 minority firefighters, double the number in 2002. (The department remains overwhelmingly male, with about 30 women among the more than 10,000 firefighters and officers.)

Commissioner Cassano said he was “very proud” of the new class and confident that their firehouse colleagues would “welcome them with open arms.”

The trainees echoed his confidence. “Everyone is going to have their opinion at first,” said Mr. Howard, who is a priority hire. “But once we’re in there and they’re going to know we’re hard workers — you know, faithful to the cause, we’re all in and we’ll be dedicated to the F.D.N.Y. — they’re going to love us.”

The goals of the Raleigh Fire Department

October 8, 2013

Definition - As understood in the workplace today, diversity implies differences in people based on their identifications with various groups. Diversity involves the process of acknowledging differences through action and going beyond one's comfort zone to be inclusive of all.

In organizations, this means developing a variety of initiatives at both the management and organizational levels and at the interpersonal levels.

Vision - The continued excellence of the Raleigh Fire Department is largely dependent upon the ability to attract, develop, and retain highly skilled, talented, and motivated members. An essential element in maintaining this quality of service is the recognition of the value of a diverse work force. Characteristics such as: age, culture, ethnicity, gender, race, religious preference, sexual orientation, and the expression of unique philosophies and ideas provide the opportunity to better understand each other.

This understanding strengthens the efficiency and productivity of the Raleigh Fire Department, whose primary objective is to provide excellent service to a diverse community.

Mission- The mission of the Raleigh Fire Department is to maintain its high standard of excellence by attaining and fostering a diverse work force. This is accomplished by reaching the following goals:

Goals - The goals of the Raleigh Fire Department with regard to diversity are:

- Uphold all federal, state, and local laws, and the Raleigh Fire Department's rules and regulations regarding employment.
- Attract and retain qualified individuals from diverse backgrounds who are committed to the continued excellence of the Raleigh Fire Department.
- Achieve and accept a diverse work force in terms of age, culture, ethnicity, gender, race, religious preference, sexual orientation, and the expression of unique philosophies and ideas.
- Provide all employees the opportunity for development and growth at every rank in the Raleigh Fire Department.
- Expect that all employees will treat each other with dignity and respect, regardless of perceived differences.

Garcetti laments lack of diversity among L.A. Firefighter recruits

January 06, 2014 | By Michael Finnegan

Mayor Eric Garcetti acknowledged Monday that Los Angeles was continuing to have trouble diversifying its ranks of firefighters, saying he did not expect much progress with the first class of recruits on his watch.

“I haven’t seen all of the stats, but what I’ve heard initially, I’m not satisfied with,” Garcetti said. “I think we need to have greater diversity in the recruit classes.”

Later this month, Garcetti plans to welcome the city’s first class of new Fire Department recruits in years.

The department, which has been fighting court battles over racial and sexual discrimination for decades, remains a long way from reflecting the city it serves.

Half of the city’s 3,200 firefighters are white, 31% are Latino, 12% are black, and 7% are Asian. Census Bureau figures show the city’s population is 29% white, 49% Latino, 11% Asian and 10% black.

Also, just 3% of the city’s firefighters are female, a figure that hasn’t budged over the last two decades, even as other large cities have increased their share of women. In San Diego, 8% of firefighters are women; in Seattle, 9%.

Last month, Interim Fire Chief James G. Featherstone called LAFD’s recruitment efforts “embarrassing” and said it must be “a lot more aggressive” in appealing to a diverse set of applicants.

For Garcetti, the makeup of the new recruit class marks a test of his pledge to change the culture of the department. On Monday, the mayor said part of the problem was that “certain people know how to game the system” in the firefighter application process, although “not in a bad way.”

“There’s a short window of time to go online, or to call,” he said. “In the first hour, if you’re the first in line -- those are the ones who are usually at the top of the list. I want to make sure that we’re educating all communities ... to be able to get there and in a fair way apply to be a firefighter.”

December 19, 2011



Leading the Team
by Linda Willing

Diversity in the fire service: The fear factor

It is not acceptable to use the excuse, "Well, we've always acted this way, so either get used to it or leave"

The subject of diversity in the fire service is one that brings up many feelings for people. One of them is fear. I hear it all the time: "I support diversity, but I'd rather not work as an officer with (fill in the blank) because I'm afraid that person might be offended by something that happens, and then I'd be in trouble."

Or this: "Whenever a new woman works with us, everyone's on edge, worried that she might feel harassed by the normal stuff that goes on in the station."

Some discomfort with those who are different is normal, but it is a company officer's job to make sure that all members of the department are included equally in any given crew.

It is also critical that departments do not allow crews to self-segregate into groups that are very similar among themselves.

Human nature

Most people would prefer to spend time with people who are more or less like themselves. It is just human nature to feel more comfortable in these types of groups.

However, there is also ample research that shows such homogenous groups generally do not make the best decisions over time, and are much more susceptible to decision making flaws such as groupthink.

Diversity, particularly diversity in thought process, is a key factor in seeing the big picture and making good decisions.

But diversity and differences can cause fear. This fear must be mitigated for real teams to form. Dealing with the fear people may have in working with those who are different is the responsibility of the department, but also individuals at the company officer level.

Leadership in this area starts at the top. All departments must have clear and reasonable policies related to diversity, harassment, and professional conduct.

It is not acceptable to use the excuse, "Well, we've always acted this way, so either get used to it or leave."

Lead by example

All department members must be trained on laws and policies that apply. Those in positions of power must lead by example.

But most diversity issues do not go as far as harassment, nor is there malicious intent in some of the misunderstandings that may occur.

More often, discomfort may result from not knowing why someone is doing or saying something, but being afraid to ask about it.

In some cases, members of the existing group may self-censor themselves to an extreme degree when dealing with those who are different, out of fear that anything they say or do might be offensive.

This can go to ridiculous lengths at times, and cause more harm than it prevents.

I remember when I was fairly new on the job there was one officer who would turn off the TV whenever I entered the room. He was afraid something might offend me and did not want to be responsible.

The result of this behavior was resentment from all the crew members toward me, and a real sense of isolation for me.

Have nothing to hide

How can you diminish the fear factor when it comes to diversity? First, make sure you have nothing to hide. The previously mentioned officer would turn off any TV program the crew happened to be watching, including the news or a sports event.

He had nothing to hide, but was fearful anyway. But there were times in those early years when crews did watch inappropriate things in the fire station. Controlling this kind of behavior is the company officer's job.

The best antidote to fear is understanding, and one way to better understand someone is simply to ask. People are almost never offended by respectful inquiry.

When such inquiry is done in the spirit of genuinely wanting to get to know someone better, the response will usually be positive.

Responsible to all

Officers must always remember that they are responsible to all members of their crew equally.

Officers should make it clear to everyone that if any individual ever has a problem with something that is happening in the station, that person is encouraged to come privately to the officer to discuss the situation.

Telling your crew that you will listen respectfully to their concerns and take them seriously is not the same as promising to agree or act on their concerns.

However, guaranteeing a private and respectful audience will go a long way toward making everyone feel more comfortable in the station.

Fear is a natural reaction to the unknown. However, when decisions are made based on fear, it is almost certain they will not be optimal.

It is an officer's responsibility to equally include everyone on the crew, and get the best from everyone on every shift. Working to eliminate fear is a critical first step in making your crews the best they can be.

About the author

Linda F. Willing worked for more than 20 years in the emergency services, including 18 as a career firefighter and fire officer. For more than 15 years, she has provided support for fire and emergency services and other organizations through her company, [RealWorld Training and Consulting](#).

Linda's work focuses on developing customized solutions in the areas of leadership development, conflict resolution, diversity management, team building, communications and decision making.

Linda is also an adjunct instructor and curriculum advisor for the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program.

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City to tweak hiring rules for diversity

2/19/2014 The Columbus Dispatch

Columbus leaders are planning to change the way the city hires police officers and firefighters to get more minorities and women in uniform.

Those changes, according to records obtained by *The Dispatch*, include modifying the standards for police and fire background checks and testing more frequently to cut down on the time candidates wait to get hired.

The city's Civil Service Commission has identified those as hurdles to hiring women and minorities during meetings with Mayor Michael B. Coleman over the past few weeks.

In July, Coleman ordered the city's Department of Public Safety to try harder to increase diversity after he noticed that nearly all of the recent graduates from the police and fire academies were white men.

Cities such as Akron, Toledo, Dayton, Boston and New York also are reassessing how to attract minorities and women.

The U.S. Department of Justice has filed lawsuits against cities that lack diversity in police and fire departments, saying safety forces better protect and serve the public when officers and firefighters mirror the population.

Over the past five years, Columbus' police and fire recruit classes have been less diverse than the overall ranks they are joining. Data show that about 85 percent of the city's police officers are white men and 90 percent are in the Fire Division.

Amy Delong, head of the city's Civil Service Commission, said the group has discussed with Coleman three changes in the background standards:

- Candidates would not be removed if they took a drug not prescribed to them such as a Percocet or Ambien no more than once.
- The city would not disqualify applicants if their drivers license was suspended for financial reasons, such as nonpayment of car insurance.
- Applicants would not be removed if they admit to minor physical or emotional domestic violence in the past 10 years, such as a fight with a sibling as minors that didn't result in criminal charges.

Police- and fire-union officials have said the standards should not be changed, because of the sensitive nature of public-safety jobs.

“We are not lowering standards,” Delong said. “This is a tweaking, and obviously we don’t want someone who is physically abusive or has a bad driving record, but we don’t want to eliminate people that could be good police officers.”

Coleman said through his spokesman that speeding the testing process is more important because good candidates find jobs in the meantime and drop out of the running.

“The process needs to be shortened and simplified because we lose too many people,” Coleman said. “We don’t have our arms wrapped around what needs to be changed, but it needs changed.”

The process is the same for every applicant and includes a multiple-choice and written exam, a background check that includes a polygraph test, an interview exam and a physical-fitness test.

Civil Service data show that a higher percentage of women and minorities are eliminated throughout the process than are white men.

Of the 6,654 applicants who took the fire exam in 2011, 26 percent were women or minorities. Of the 533 applicants who were removed after a background check, about 40 percent were women or minorities.

Of the 1,551 applicants who failed the test, 28 percent were women or minorities.

The police exam produced slightly better results.

Of the 5,913 applicants, 39 percent were minorities or women. When the hiring process was complete, minorities and women made up 23 percent of the pool.

Another problem is that the hiring process can takes years before the testing is done and the city exhausts the list of eligible candidates.

Police face an uphill battle in the black community, where there’s a distrust of officers, recruiters said. And there’s a misconception that firefighters primarily risk their lives going into burning buildings.

Fire Chief Gregory A. Paxton said most of the work in the Fire Division is helping people who are ill or injured. He wants to work more with the military to find minorities and women.

There’s also the age issue. State law requires law-enforcement officers to be at least 21. Candidates must be at least 20 1/2 years old.

“A lot happens once you turn 18 to the time you turn 21, and some of it isn’t always good,” said Columbus Police Officer Jason Pappas, president of the Fraternal Order of Police Capital City Lodge No. 9. “And if you are in college and get your degree, do you want to come work where

you work third shift with Tuesdays and Wednesdays off and have to work weekends and holidays?”

Some police officers and firefighters also question how serious the city is about improving diversity, pointing to the budget allocating a combined \$40,000 for the police and fire divisions to recruit minorities and women in 2012 and \$60,000 this year.

By comparison, the city has budgeted nearly \$900,000 this year to help minority- and female-owned businesses.

Delong’s group has proposed that the city hire a full-time professional recruiter.

“It’s not a lot of money,” she said. “But we are looking at other things we believe will help, such as more-frequent testing and keeping better track of people we meet at events to see if those people are showing up to take the test.”

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