D.C. Fire Department investigation highlights underfunding

Adam Sagitov and Nick Barrickman
21 March 2013

A row has erupted between the District of Columbia Council's public safety committee and the D.C. Fire & Emergency Services Department (FEMS) over inaccurate information supplied by the agency about the number and readiness of engines in the FEMS reserve fleet. The discovery was made in an audit by the emergency worker's union, the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), which was originally meant to promote confidence in the department's resources. However, the inaccuracies exposed yet another attempt by the city government to undercut safety funding.

The report, which was submitted last month to the council, was found to incorrectly list at least four trucks and six engine pumpers that have either been sold or remain in disrepair. The inaccuracies have provided another opportunity for D.C. officials to stoke public outrage against FEMS. Chief Kenneth B. Ellerbe and an unnamed deputy have assumed responsibility, with the latter announcing his resignation in response to the findings.

The findings surfaced after a spate of difficulties at the department, including an event earlier this month in which a police officer was left to wait for nearly a half hour for an ambulance to arrive after being injured in a hit-and-run. The ambulance that finally did arrive came from neighboring Prince George's County, Maryland. A D.C. Council member has called for a March 28 hearing to address the inaccuracies and launch an inquiry into the capacity of FEMS for timely ambulance response.

Appointed by D.C. mayor Vincent Gray, a Democrat, in 2010, Ellerbe has proposed redeployment schemes for firefighters and paramedics that would reduce shifts to save money. In his 2012 FY Budget Oversight report to the D.C. Council, Ellerbe proposed reducing the size of the department by 20 percent. This included eliminating 475 full-time jobs, and moving from 24-hour shifts to 12-hour shifts, effectively doubling the number of days firefighters would work per month.

Last November, the fire chief announced a plan to remove all 14 Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulances from active duty between the hours of 1:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. because of "low demand." Supposedly, this was in response to a critical shortage of paramedics, who are often forced to take on extended overtime shifts that go beyond their normal 24 hours. However, union officials have said that the department is currently sitting on 200 staff vacancies for which it has full funding within its $197 million budget.

Unsurprisingly, the media has followed suit in demanding the "lazy" firefighters accept longer hours. In a March 17 editorial, the *Washington Post* voiced its support for the scheme, while demonizing firefighters and paramedics for allowing negotiations to get "mired in an impasse." The editorial went on to say that "[s]ignificantly, the union that represents the department's civilian paramedics agrees with the chief that the issue is not...insufficient resources but instead a lack of flexibility in the system"—meaning that firefighters have too much control over their jobs and need to be dealt with more ruthlessly.

In early January, D.C. councilman Wells accused D.C. firefighters of staging a "sick-out" on New Year's Eve, stating, "this is an issue that must be resolved and never repeated. Whatever personnel and management issues may exist, the safety of the residents of the District of Columbia are non-negotiable."

Officials have attributed the city's stated $417 million budget surplus to various sources of revenue, such as estate and income tax collections. But a large portion of the surplus can be attributed to the slashing of funds for the district’s poor and working class in the forms of cuts in education, emergency response services and affordable housing programs.

For example, the council imposed stricter guidelines for impoverished single-parent households receiving the already meager Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefit. This and other programs are likely to be further affected by the federal sequester, which went into effect at the beginning of this month.

Currently, one fifth of D.C. residents live on less than $10,000 a year, including a third of the District’s children, more than 1,600 of whom are homeless. This, under conditions where the city’s top 5 percent make an average of nearly $500,000 a year.

The private sector continues to see profits rise at the expense of the working class. It was reported earlier this month that Pepco, the utility largely responsible for more than a million power outages in the D.C. area last summer, recently requested permission from the D.C. Public Service Commission to institute a $52 million rate hike for its customers. The company has won nearly $72 million in rate hikes as of 2006.

Joe Rigby, the CEO of Pepco, saw his income rise to $7.2 million in 2011, despite his company being placed at the bottom of *Business Insider* ’s “19 Most Hated Companies in America.” The company as a whole pays no federal or state taxes, while receiving upward of $800 million in refunds from the government.

The city has seen an influx of higher-paid government and private sector individuals, whose presence has driven the cost of living sky high for working class residents. Mayor Vincent Gray praised this development, stating, “We are adding about 1,100 new people to the city every month. These are people; young people mostly, a lot of disposable income. I like them coming to the city. They pay a lot of taxes.”