



CALIFORNIA

County Fire Department audit finds cheating in hiring, promotions



L.A. County fire Chief Daryl Osby confirmed the department did not investigate allegations of nepotism and cheating made in 2012 by a former fire captain, but he has asked the county Auditor-Controller Department to launch a new inquiry. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

By PAUL PRINGLE, ABBY SEWELL

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The Los Angeles County Fire Department found itself Monday engulfed in a growing scandal after auditors uncovered evidence that the type of cheating that undermined the agency's hiring process extended to promotional exams and other testing requirements, including for skills in emergency medical treatment.

The review by the county Auditor-Controller Department audit was launched in response to a Los Angeles Times investigation last year that found that an unusually high number of family members of firefighters were recruited by the department and that insiders had access to the interview questions and answers for job candidates.

Auditors largely confirmed The Times' findings and turned up evidence of more widespread cheating, especially in the improper sharing of test materials by employees, among them a battalion chief and 10 captains.

“Dissemination of examination content between fire personnel is not uncommon,” auditors said in their report to the county Board of Supervisors.

The official who oversaw the audit said Monday that his office would give Fire Chief Daryl Osby detailed information about how EMT tests and exams for positions such as captain and dispatcher were compromised.

Robert Campbell, the acting assistant auditor-controller, said the information would be contained in a confidential report and it would be the Fire

Department's responsibility to deal with employees who broke the rules.

“We’re not the ultimate decision-makers in any disciplinary action,” Campbell said of the audit office.

Osby, who had requested the audit, said in an email late Monday that the department “will be addressing each and every substantiated allegation” outlined in the report. He said he would be “resolute in taking the appropriate administrative action against” employees who violated department policies.

Because the audit was confined to issues raised by The Times’ investigation, auditors said they did not conduct a comprehensive inquiry into other potential test violations. Investigators for the auditor’s office only stumbled upon the other breaches while searching emails related to hiring.

They said they did not know “the entire population of examinations that were compromised,” and the problem could be worse.

Meanwhile, fire officials told The Times last year that the department used a computer program to randomly select candidates to test for firefighter jobs, which are highly coveted for their six-figure salaries and generous benefits. Auditors, however, determined that the system might not have been random at all, with investigators being told that candidates instead were handpicked by managers. The audit said the managers could not provide documentation for the process used in many of the selections.

“These findings raise questions about the integrity of the selection process,” auditors wrote in their report.

Osby sent an email to the Board of Supervisors over the weekend outlining steps the department had taken to reform recruitment procedures, including developing a new exam.

That was not enough for Supervisor Sheila Kuehl. Citing the audit's finding that department employees improperly disseminated materials for additional tests, she said, "I find the fire chief's response to us inadequate."

"I think we need to dig further into how broadly this permeated the Fire Department and other examinations," said Kuehl, who is based on the Westside.

She said she was worried about the "talented individuals we are not bringing into the Fire Department because of this kind of cronyism or nepotism," including women and minorities.

Two other supervisors expressed similar concerns. Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents South Los Angeles, said he would ask for a follow-up report on the demographics of the job candidates to see if women and minorities had been shut out.

"Absent presentation of demographic data, that's a reasonable conclusion to draw," he said.

He said of the audit's findings: "It's quite problematic, and I think corrective action is warranted, and I think the public has a right to expect it and, indeed, will see it."

The Times reported in its investigation, which was published in October, that just 1.4% of county firefighters were women. At the same time, at least 183 sons of current or former firefighters have served on the force since the start of 2012, according to an analysis of payroll, pension, birth, marriage and other records.

All told, sons represent nearly 7% of the county's 2,750 firefighters. When brothers, nephews and other relatives are included, at least 370 firefighters — 13% of the department ranks — are related to someone now or previously on the force, The Times found.

Since 2007, the audit said, 15% of the 701 firefighters hired had family connections to the department, figures that mirrored The Times' numbers. Nearly 95% of all applicants for the jobs are rejected.

Supervisor Hilda Solis, who represents the eastern portion of the county, said in a statement that she was “very troubled” by the audit's conclusions.

“The hiring process was compromised, which erodes public trust and prevents the department from identifying the best candidates,” she said. “The opportunity to work as a firefighter must be open to all, including women and members of minority groups, who must compete in an environment free of favoritism or nepotism.”

Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, from the San Fernando Valley area, said in a statement: “There is no excuse for impropriety in administering any of these tests and those responsible must be held accountable.”

The audit cited a striking failure of memory among employees who were interviewed about sharing test materials. In one case, the report said, a captain who emailed job interview questions to another captain stepped out of the session with investigators to “confer privately with his union representative, after which he repeatedly stated that he did not recall the circumstances under which he came to be in possession of” the material.

Dave Gillotte, president of Local 1014 of the International Assn. of Fire Fighters, did not respond to requests for comment.

In November, the supervisors voted to set up a “strike team” to oversee the firefighter hiring. That came after then-Supervisor Gloria Molina, who was about to be termed-out for the seat now held by Solis, said hiring should be taken entirely out of the hands of the Fire Department and turned over to the county’s personnel agency.

The proposal did not get support from the other board members. Molina said Monday that given the extent of the problem, the board would have “no choice” but to revisit the proposal, or that Osby “should himself turn over the hiring responsibility to the larger human resources office.”

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