

CALIFORNIA

L.A. County Fire Department workers could be fired in cheating scandal



"I absolutely will not tolerate any behavior that undermines the integrity of our department," said Fire Chief Daryl Osby, shown in 2014. (Anne Cusack, Los Angeles Times)

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A number of Los Angeles County Fire Department employees could lose their jobs or face lesser punishment as part of a crackdown on cheating in the agency's hiring process, Fire Chief Daryl Osby said Wednesday.

Osby declined to disclose the precise count of employees who could be fired or otherwise disciplined, but said it was fewer than 50.

Los Angeles Times

An inquiry by the county Department of Auditor-Controller determined that the employees improperly obtained and in some cases shared confidential testing material used to hire firefighters, the chief said. The inquiry was triggered by a Times investigation last year into nepotism and cheating in the department.

On Wednesday, the department began testing more than 4,500 applicants for the highly coveted firefighter positions as part of a new hiring regimen designed to eliminate favoritism and dishonesty. The tests were given at the Fairplex in Pomona under tight security, with the exams transported in an armored truck and sheriff's deputies assigned to keep an eye on them.

Next month, Osby said, the department will also implement its first-ever anti-nepotism policy. It will forbid relatives and friends of applicants from playing any role in their hiring. Similar rules will apply to promotions and performance evaluations.

"Today we turn the page from our past and are beginning a new era in the 92-year history of the department," he said in a statement. "We're opening a chapter of test integrity with an exam process that is fair, transparent and provides equal opportunities for people to work in one of the county's great public service agencies."

Osby said employees implicated in the auditor's probe will be notified of impending discipline within two to three weeks.

"While the numbers show that cheating was far from endemic or widespread, I absolutely will not tolerate any behavior that undermines the integrity of our department," he said.

He added that the inquiry was ongoing and it was possible that more employees could be punished.

The Times investigation published last October found that at least 370 firefighters on the payroll since 2012 were related to current or former members of the department, including 183 sons, according to an analysis of birth, marriage and other records. The

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sons accounted for nearly five times the number of women in the ranks, who made up just 1.4% of the 2,750-member agency.

In addition, The Times found that employees could easily get their hands on questions and answers used to interview firefighter applicants and pass them on to family members applying for jobs. The questions and answers were meant to be kept under lock and key.

Two veteran firefighters told The Times that the material circulated freely through station houses. They provided to the newspaper lists of questions and answers that they were not allowed to have.

The cheating scandal has underscored the fierce competition for the firefighter positions, which offer six-figure salaries and generous benefits. Hiring is supposed to be solely on merit, and nearly 95% of applicants are rejected.

Interviews and written tests do not assess candidates for specific firefighter skills they could have picked up from a relative, such as deploying ladders or providing emergency medical assistance. Those are taught in the recruit academy.

The auditor's inquiry examined millions of department emails to identify employees who accessed the testing material without authorization. It focused on questions and answers used from 2007 through 2011, the period in which The Times found that the interviews could have been compromised.

Auditor investigators concluded that 17 employees, including one battalion chief and 10 captains, sent interview material to others, including to non-county email accounts. In one case, a job candidate who received copies of the questions and answers was a captain's son who sent emails to his father requesting clarification on parts of the material, the investigation found. That son was hired.

The county probe further uncovered evidence of breaches in promotional exams and other tests. Osby said he has asked county personnel officials to review those.

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The auditor's inquiry also determined that a computer program — informally known as the lottery — that department officials said was used to randomly select candidates to test for the entry-level firefighter jobs might not have been random at all. Auditors said applicants instead were handpicked by department managers.

Osby has scrapped the lottery along with the old testing material. Now, all qualified applicants will be given a written test and those who pass will be interviewed. The tests will be administered by an outside firm. No county employees will have access to the exams, Osby said, and applicants must sign confidentiality agreements promising not to divulge the questions and answers.

In addition, each written test will be used only once and questions will not be recycled from year to year, as they were previously, the chief said.

“Every test that the department gives to applicants will be materially different,” Osby said.

The interviews will be revamped and, unlike in the past, the department will make an audio recording of them, he added.

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