

POLICY BRIEF
An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

January 18, 2005

Volume 5, Number 3

Cooling Down Fire Bureau Spending

The City of Pittsburgh can achieve ample fire protection with significantly fewer firefighters, fewer fire stations, and a change in the work turns by personnel. We have long known this to be the case. Now, a recently released report confirms our findings and provides detailed analysis of how the savings can be achieved.

Prepared for the City's oversight board by Emergency Response and Safety Education Enterprises (ERASE), the report deals with a variety of issues related to fire staffing, response times, apparatus used by the department, and other topics. The most important section of the study contains the recommendations for staffing and station locations. Specifically, the report calls for eliminating 288 jobs by attrition and closing 13 existing stations while constructing three new ones in more optimal locations.

These findings and recommendations are not new or surprising given the previous body of research that exists. Going back to 1996, the Competitive Pittsburgh Task Force found that Pittsburgh exceeded similarly sized cities in terms of fire stations, engine and truck companies, and staffing, while having a shorter workweek than that of its peers. Likewise, our own research on per capita staffing (all uniformed and civilian employees) and per capita expenditures in Pittsburgh's fire bureau exceeded nearly every other city we examined across the country.

All of this is powerful evidence that the size--and costs--of the fire bureau need to be cut back. With an employee count that exceeds other cities (on a per-1000 person rate), Pittsburgh's costs are higher than in other places. Moreover, the average salary for a firefighter with five years experience was nearly \$7,000 higher in Pittsburgh than the average of four other regional hub cities. In fact, if Pittsburgh had cut its 2004 fire expenditures back to the rate of other hub cities (Salt Lake, Charlotte, Columbus, and Omaha), the nearly \$81 million in expenditures could have been reduced by almost \$30 million.

Also important are the study's recommendations on overtime, which, for the majority of 2004, amounted to over \$18,000 per day. It is not surprising that this pattern of overtime in the fire department is also found in the Pittsburgh Schools, and various other agencies such as the Port Authority. Unfortunately, we keep uncovering the presence of high overtime costs among Pittsburgh's governmental units.

The report suggests the use of "floaters" in order to cut down on overtime costs. Current work arrangements in the City's fire bureau is a 10/14 shift, which involves a rotation of four 10 hour day shifts, followed by four days off, followed by four 14 hour night shifts and then four days off. The report advocates a rearrangement to a 24-hour shift followed by 48 hours off with the use of "floating" personnel to avoid having to pay over time. This change would account for roughly \$2.6 million of the projected \$19.2 million total savings.

The Oversight Board plans to use the ERASE recommendations as negotiations proceed through the arbitration process and in upcoming budget preparations in future years. The report's recommendations for saving money and improving operating efficiencies are thoroughly documented and address the key elements involved in correcting the economic problems of the fire bureau. It is important that the Oversight Board, the Act 47 Coordinator and City officials move forward quickly to adopt the report's recommendations.

Eric Montarti, Policy Analyst

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

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<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
