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Brother vs. Brother

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Jan 1, 2003 12:00 PM

Protesters in Washington, D.C., are a common sight, but it's unusual when they're card-carrying IAFF members protesting a union resolution.

On June 14, about 35 people picketed the International Association of Fire Fighters headquarters to protest Resolution 43, which had been submitted by the Prince George's County (Md.) Professional Firefighters and Paramedics Association, Local 1619, at the 2000 IAFF convention. Prince George's County is just east of Washington, D.C.

Resolution 43 identified 38 individual Prince George's County volunteer fire department corporations as "rival organizations," a term from the IAFF constitution and bylaws. The resolution further called for charges to be placed against IAFF members who belong to these rival organizations, charging that "these individuals continue to belong to volunteer organizations that make decisions which impair the rights and sometimes safety of members of Local 1619."



The affected IAFF union members have a choice: They can either quit volunteering or quit the union. The protesters want to continue to both volunteer and maintain their IAFF memberships without harassment.

County breakdown

Gary Steen organized the protest march. A District of Columbia career firefighter and member of IAFF Local 36, Steen is also a deputy fire chief of the Kentland Volunteer Fire Department. Six years ago, Prince George's County removed the career staff from Kentland Fire Station 33 as part of a countywide redeployment. Most of their volunteers are off-duty career firefighters from Washington, D.C., and surrounding Maryland and Virginia departments.

Prince George's County features complex, varsity-level firefighting. The 38 fiercely independent volunteer corporations and the county provide fire and ambulance service through 47 stations over 487 square miles to more than 800,000 residents. At the heart of the Baltimore — Washington corridor, the county is a diverse community with 27 municipalities, pockets of wealth, expanding upper-middle class communities and acres of urban blight. Prince George's Fire Department is the busiest of the Washington metro-area jurisdictions, handling about 340 incidents each day.

In March 1966, Prince George's established the position of paid firefighters under the merit classification system. At that time, the county also absorbed the individuals hired by the volunteer fire department corporations. With the assistance of the District of Columbia Local 36, Local 1619 received its charter that same year.

By FY 2001, there were 792 county-budgeted firefighter positions. With the exception of command, administrative staff and 15 EMS transport units, career employees work at a fire station and not on a specific response unit. County staffing at each of the 45 volunteer stations is arrived at after negotiation between the county and each volunteer fire department's leadership.

How the system works

Career staff are assigned to stations rather than individual fire units to preserve and encourage volunteer participation. For example, four county employees work weekdays at a volunteer station that runs an ambulance, engine and aerial. County dispatch assumes the station can get only one suppression unit on the road immediately, so the station needs volunteers to provide minimum staffing for a second unit.

If the ambulance is out of the station on a run with two county firefighters when a structural fire dispatch comes in, then the station will need one volunteer to supplement the two remaining county firefighters to meet the minimum staffing for the engine. Two volunteers are needed to meet the minimum staffing for the aerial, and five volunteers are needed for both the engine and aerial to respond.

The county had between 1,200 to 1,400 volunteers within the county in 2002. That number includes active, administrative, life and associate members. An accurate countywide figure of volunteers qualified to provide service as a firefighter, ambulance technician, fire company officer or command officer was unavailable, but the best guess is that 600 to 800 volunteers are qualified to ride fire trucks and ambulances, with 150 to 500 of them riding a unit at least twice a month.

Resolution 43 is the latest in a 30-year effort by Local 1619 to discourage IAFF members from volunteering in Prince George's County. In the 1970s, District of Columbia IAFF Local 36 members were asked not to participate as volunteer command or unit officers in the county. It was a one-on-one effort with mixed results. Today, the county has between 150 and 200 "two-hatters," active volunteers in the county who are also IAFF members from other jurisdictions.

Why career firefighters volunteer

So why would people who work 40 to 56 hours per week as career firefighters want to spend even more time in a fire station as a Prince George's County volunteer? Seven factors seem to drive this activity:

1. **They started as a volunteer.** It's hard to walk away from the organization that you joined as a teenager. Local 1619 President Tom McEachin was a Kentland volunteer. Some two-hatters were riding as volunteer fire unit officers when they were still in high school.

In addition, most of the fire stations have only daytime career staff, with volunteers handling evening and weekend incidents. The need for volunteers will increase in 2003, as Prince George's Fire Department Chief Ronald D. Blackwell removed daytime county staff from three volunteer fire stations on July 31 and has proposed other cutbacks as part of fiscal reorganization.

2. **The volunteer fire department is part of the family tradition.** For example, Kentland Deputy Chief Gary Steen is a fourth-generation volunteer — from his mother's side. He is a third-generation volunteer from his father's side. Steen has almost 18 years as a Kentland volunteer, but less than two years as a Washington, D.C., career firefighter.
3. **The volunteer fire station fights more fires than the department where they receive a paycheck.** It's hard to practice your firefighting craft when your paid job is spent resetting alarm bells or riding an ambulance. Many of the firefighters who work as career staff in northern Virginia or in federal and institutional fire departments mentioned that they catch more structural fires as a volunteer than as a career firefighter.
4. **It's easier to obtain advanced training as a volunteer.** Different funding sources and less paperwork are two big reasons why so many young career firefighters attend conferences and special training as members of their volunteer departments. Tight budgets mean little chance for a metro firefighter to attend an out-of-town training class or conference. Ironically, the employer benefits from firefighters participating in volunteer-funded certification and specialty training.

This behavior showed up in surveys of 75 to 200 firefighters conducted during the International Association of Fire Chiefs' Fire-Rescue International conferences from 1994-1999. Between 12% and 20% of the company officer program attendees were career firefighters who were also active at a volunteer department. In most cases, the volunteer organization paid for the conference trip and the class registration.

This professional development path isn't new. Many of the Washington, D.C., Local 36 members who were asked in the 1970s to stop volunteering refused. At the time, they were twenty-something firefighters or "wagon drivers" in their career departments and chief officers in their volunteer departments. Now they're fifty-something career command officers and life members in their volunteer organization. They did well in their career promotional exams because of their volunteer experience.

5. **Rapid advancement.** Volunteer fire departments are unencumbered by civil service regulations. They can ignore time-in-grade restrictions, civil service promotional exams, probationary periods, annual performance evaluations and

affirmative-action requirements. Some volunteers can rapidly advance to command ranks while still under 30. Many of today's two-hatters are firefighters in their paid job and command officers as volunteers.

6. **Volunteer work is more fun than the paid job.** For instance, each of the 38 corporations is a freestanding entity operating from a single fire station. Five of the corporations run two stations and one has three stations. That means a small group, a short chain of command and more control over what goes on in the station. The volunteer departments are like mom-and-pop stores that enjoy some autonomy.

In contrast, D.C. firefighters are in a large city agency with 33 fire stations and almost 2,000 employees. There's a deep chain of command, many layers of management, and dozens of rules and regulations that dictate how to do things. The city is a monolithic bureaucracy where one firefighter is a small cog in a big machine.

A volunteer department also allows a higher level of control over tasks and assignments. For example, the Kentland 33, Ritchie 37 and West Lanham Hills 28 stations no longer provide ambulance transportation service. They're still EMS first responders, but the transport unit must come from another station. The stations that don't provide ambulance transport have higher volunteer turnout than their neighbors, possibly because "real firefighters do not ride ambulances," according to an Internet message posting. (See sidebar at left.)

7. **Take-home toys.** Each of the 38 independent volunteer fire companies has at least three command-level officers, and one or two of these chiefs have take-home vehicles. About half of the more than 70 volunteer take-home vehicles resemble unmarked police cars or suvs, with no markings on the outside but full emergency response packages. Critics speculate that the unmarked response vehicles make it easier for the command officers to commute to their day jobs outside of the county, especially if their day job is as a paid firefighter in another jurisdiction.

Challenges for the chief

Disputes between paid firefighters and volunteers can involve sharp words and strong feelings. (See sidebar below.) It requires strong and clear leadership to maintain a non-hostile work environment in a fire station with such stark contrasts. If you are the fire chief, county coordinator or agency head, here are some suggestions:

1. **Maintain a zero-tolerance policy on violence.** Both career and volunteer organizations must respond immediately to any fights or confrontations. Because the fire station is a workplace, the perception of threat of violence is in the eye of the person complaining, not in the evaluation of the chief officer. A chief should use the same approach as in a response to a sexual harassment complaint, including checking with the department's attorney. Failure to acknowledge a complaint could be expensive for the jurisdiction and career-ending for the chief.

Prince George's County has had some experience in this issue. For example, two career and six volunteer firefighters were suspended in 1995 after fighting over who would take in the first hose to fight a kitchen fire in Seat Pleasant. A brawl in a Landover townhouse in 2000 did more damage than the fire; another brawl that year involved a career employee working at Bladensburg and a Kentland volunteer captain.

2. **Enact a zero-tolerance policy on vandalism.** Document, take pictures and fill out the property-loss paperwork in these situations.
3. **Clarify unacceptable fire station behavior.** Equal-employment opportunity case law shows that certain words are "actionable" under racial and sexual harassment regulations. An organization must take immediate corrective action to address improper workplace behavior. Failing to act means the organization approves of the action, statement or behavior. In this case, the phrase "paid maid" or "tick" may be construed as a hostile statement, even when not prefaced by expletives.

Sometimes the combatants need a time-out. During a 1992 career — volunteer conflict, Prince George's Fire Department moved a dozen employees out of both Oxon Hill fire stations and established a temporary county fire station in a nearby industrial park. The conflict came to this after a career station commander called a volunteer "incompetent."

4. **Concentrate on providing emergency services to the citizens.** Prince George's Fire Chief Ronald D. Blackwell and the international office of the IAFF have stated that Resolution 43 should remain an internal matter between Local 1619 and the surrounding locals.

Death and disability concerns

There are larger issues you may want to consider. Brian Collins and Phillip Dean were career firefighters in Fort Worth, Texas,

and members of the all-volunteer River Oaks Volunteer Fire Department. Both responded to a Lake Worth, Texas, church fire in February 1999. The roof of the burning church collapsed, killing Collins, Dean and Gary Sanders, a Samson Park Volunteer Fire Department member.

This tragedy worsened when the Fort Worth City retirement board ruled that neither Collins nor Dean were eligible for line-of-duty death benefits because they weren't working as city firefighters when the roof collapsed. The difference worked out to \$1,600 a month per family. Neither the city of Lake Worth nor the city of River Oaks would assume the \$456,000 obligation to cover the line-of-duty benefits for Collins and Dean.

Their widows took the retirement board to court and lost the first two rounds. In April 2001, they were preparing an appeal to the state supreme court when Fort Worth Mayor Kenneth Barr was able to convince the city to pay the full line-of-duty death benefits.

To avoid such a scenario, a fire chief, county coordinator or agency head should have a clear written policy on what the employer will do when an employee is injured, disabled or killed while donating his or her services as a member of a volunteer organization.

Chiefs should also look at the impact of volunteering on occupational disability regulations. Some fire departments specifically prohibit their employees from working as part-time firefighters or per diem paramedics because the second job may jeopardize the cancer, heart-lung or infectious disease presumptions written into the state industrial commission or workers' compensation regulations.

The concern is that a disability claim could be refused, with risk management ruling that the condition came from the employee's off-the-job activity as a volunteer firefighter/paramedic. If the employer prohibits working as a per-diem paramedic on a private ambulance, why can the off-duty employee ride as a paramedic with a volunteer department?

Career — volunteer relations have always required varsity-level management skill. After the dust settles, Resolution 43 is still a matter between the Washington-area IAFF locals and the estimated 200 two-hatters who volunteer in Prince George's County. The questions raised will affect other communities that have two-hatters.

A recurring plea from both sides is the need for respect by the other side. Unfortunately, that may be as elusive as peace in the Middle East.

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Ambulance duty drives away volunteers

There is speculation that one of the reasons certain stations in Prince George's County enjoy robust volunteer turnout is that those members avoid ambulance duty. As a volunteer stated on a Web-based discussion forum, "Real firefighters do not ride ambulances."

Older volunteers recall the shift of members when stations agreed to pick up ambulance duty. For example, when an ambulance moved from Brentwood 4 to neighboring Mount Rainer 3, membership swelled in the ambulance-less Brentwood and fell in Mount Rainer. Brentwood has no county employees staffing fire trucks, but it does have Medic 4, a county-staffed 24-hour paramedic ambulance.

In general, the volunteers hate ambulance duty, and there's a pattern of crews refusing to respond in the ambulance. West Lanham Hills 28 stopped running an ambulance in 1991 during a dispute with Kentland over sending an ambulance into Station 33's area. Riverdale Heights 13 refused to send an ambulance into the West Lanham Hills district in early 1997 because of comments made by the crew from Station 28. Tower 33 was out of service for extensive repairs. Prince George's Fire Department offered the use of a county-owned reserve truck, if Kentland also placed an ambulance at Station 33. Tower 33 remained out of service for 105 days.

The following is an extreme example of the varsity-level conflict resolution. The Riverdale Volunteer Fire Department Company 7 was involved in a two-front battle with the county fire department and the Town of Riverdale Park when the volunteers

decided to stop providing ambulance service.

On Nov. 26, 1999, Riverdale Chief Charles A. Ryan III sent the following letter to then — Prince George's Chief Ron Siarnicki: "As a result of a reduction in membership, we feel that we can no longer provide the quality of a consistent and reliable response with the ambulance."

The county chief asked the volunteer department to continue to provide ambulance service, but the volunteers refused to respond to ambulance calls. They hid the volunteer department — purchased ambulance from the county fire department and the Town of Riverdale Park.

The relationships are complex. The town owns the building, Company 7 owns the ambulance, and the county fire chief approves volunteer command officer appointments. After the ambulance went missing, Siarnicki demoted Ryan and Asst. Chief Robert Cease to captains and assigned a reserve county ambulance to Station 7 with a daytime career crew. After a seven-day impasse, the town evicted the volunteer fire department from the building and obtained a restraining order that prohibited the volunteers from entering the station or interfering with career firefighters who took over operations. The volunteer corporation was also ordered to produce the missing ambulance. Today, the Riverdale ambulance continues to respond from Station 7.

As the years go by, the county fire department continues to handle more EMS duties. In addition to staffing daytime ambulances, the county operates three 24-hour EMT-level ambulances and twelve 24-hour paramedic ambulances. It isn't enough. Even with mutual aid, some critical patients do not receive paramedic-level service.

The need for paramedic service is so critical that Siarnicki established the Emergency Response Technician for cross-trained firefighter/paramedics. County employees hired since 1999 are under the ERT classification and are required to obtain National Registry EMT-Paramedic certification within the first four years of employment or be subject to dismissal.

Gripes about two-hatters go national

Firefighters are compassionate, competitive and enthusiastic practitioners of a highly physical, very technical craft that relies on small group teamwork. They are action-oriented and tend to see issues in stark contrast: dead or alive, right or wrong. The two-hat issue cuts to core beliefs on both sides. The issues in Prince George's County provide an extreme example of the situation that exists in almost every combination fire station.

For the members of Local 1619, the two-hatters are disrespectful of the efforts of the union brothers who fought the labor battles from years gone by. "They are like the able-bodied guy that uses a handicapped parking permit. Just because he can does not mean that he should." The two-hatters are disregarding IAFF Rule 15, Section 2, and Resolution 43. Six months after Local 1619 President Tom McEachin made the formal complaint, D.C. Local 36 is pressing charges against 41 of their members for violating Resolution 43. One reason for the delay is the cost Local 36 will incur when they formally bring a member up on charges. They will spend thousands of dollars in legal fees and use hundreds of staff hours if they formally prosecute all 41 members.

The volunteer with an IAFF membership card feels that he can do what he wants to do during his off-duty time. Volunteering in Prince George's County meets a personal and professional need. Shortly after McEachin's letters went to the presidents of the neighboring IAFF locals, volunteer organizations started a vigorous opposition to Local 1619's action.


The opposition expanded a local issue into a national crisis. Local 1619 leaders were accused of trying to eliminate all volunteers in the county or increase career positions by forcing two-hatters to resign. Former volunteer fire chief and Pennsylvania Congressman Curt Weldon made a statement on the floor of the House of Representatives on Feb. 27, asking, "Does this mean that those career firefighters from other departments that went to New York City would lose their union cards if this were enforced because they were volunteering to help their brother firefighters in a time of need?" That is not the objective of Resolution 43, which objects to concurrent memberships in the IAFF and a volunteer department.

The Maryland General Assembly drafted Joint Resolution 39 as a response to IAFF Resolution 43. The goal of the resolution was to "... preserve the rights of firefighters who are members of a union to serve their communities and hone their skills by serving in volunteer fire departments."

During the March 2002 committee hearings on Joint Resolution 39 in the Maryland state house, Kevin O'Connor, special assistant to the IAFF general president, provided the labor perspective. "Off-duty firefighters from surrounding jurisdictions volunteer their services in Montgomery and Prince George's. In that capacity, many of these two-hatters demean, insult and intimidate career firefighters in the county. More importantly, they undermine the level of service by consistently thwarting attempts to institute a unified command structure and use their position as volunteer officers to undermine the work of career officers who have completed and earned promotion through a merit system process."

There is a nuclear red-hot button issue when the volunteer chief is also an IAFF member. O'Connor expanded on this issue in his testimony. "These two-hatter volunteer chiefs relegate career firefighters — their union brothers — to menial duties. They force them to spend their days confined to certain rooms in the firehouse. They even deny career firefighters — who are infinitely better trained and equipped to respond to an emergency and whom your tax dollars pay for — the right to respond on certain calls. It's abhorrent. From our perspective, these two-hatters are not union brothers. They are an anathema."

The joint resolution died in committee, but the International Association of Fire Chiefs weighed in on the issue in a November press release: "While the IAFC disagrees with this particular IAFF membership rule, we must respect and defend each organization's ability to independently set its own rules and requirements through its own democratic governing process. We encourage the IAFF to internally engage in discussions to address this issue and work to find a solution that is acceptable to both the IAFF and the volunteer fire service.

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