

Feature

Burning Questions

Understaffed and Overworked, the Baltimore City Fire Department--Once Hailed as the Nation's Best--Faces a Crisis Point



Sam Holden

Smoked House: A vacant fire station at Ponca Street and Holabird Avenue in Southeast Baltimore, one of the many city firehouses closed or consolidated in recent years

By Michael Anft and Van Smith

In April 1996, a South Baltimore rowhouse catches fire. Most of the fire engines and trucks stationed near the house in the 100 block of West Fort Avenue are fighting another blaze in Pigtown. The first unit to arrive at the scene, five minutes after the 911 call reaches Baltimore City Fire Department headquarters, comes from a station northeast of downtown, nearly three miles away. A 66-year-old resident, taking an afternoon nap, dies in the blaze, which occurs in an area where two firehouses had been shut down in recent years. +

Nine months later, on an ice-cold January morning, a blaze breaks out near a kitchen stove used to heat a Reservoir Hill rowhouse. Four residents perish. Of the six units (four engines and two trucks) sent to 909 Chauncy Ave. that morning on the first alarm, only one would have been dispatched in the late 1980s. But since then, three nearby engine companies, a truck, and an aerial tower (combined pumper and ladder truck) company had been closed due to budget cuts. As a result, the alarm assignment is filled by more distant companies, some from two miles away. A spokesperson for the fire officers' union calls the deaths "criminal."



Mayor Kurt Schmoke (left) and Fire Chief Herman Williams Jr. have presided over the downsizing of the city's fire department while demand for its services has risen

These are the two most tragic tales cited by firefighters when they explain the slow, painful dilution of the Baltimore City Fire Department (BCFD)--once considered by outside observers to be among the nation's best--but they are hardly the only ones. Rank-and-file firefighters and their union leaders worry that the shrinking of the department has significantly slowed response times and put the public at risk. They claim the Schmoke administration has neglected BCFD's needs, even as the Baltimore City Police Department's budget has spiraled upward (see figure 1, page 16). "We're the stepchild of the public-safety system," says Rick Schluderberg, acting president of the International Association of Firefighters Local 734.

Most observers agree that under the leadership of Chief Herman Williams Jr., who was appointed in April 1992, BCFD has made strides in reducing fire deaths, improving minority hiring, and purchasing fire equipment. But the department's annual budget since fiscal year 1993 has failed to keep up with inflation, despite increases in calls for fire-service and fire-



Rick Schluderberg (left) and Stephen Fugate--officials with the union locals representing city firefighters and fire officers, respectively--warn of the impact of budget and staffing cuts on the department. "We are months away from disaster," Fugate says

company assistance. Calls for service, after a 185 percent increase over the past 18 years, dropped slightly in 1997, but city firefighters maintain that the still force is stretched to the limit.

Department officials point out that the reduction in fire-suppression staff by about 20 percent over the past decade mirrors a similar decline in the city's population. "We don't have the same fire-protection needs we had 10 years ago," Williams says. "There's a shift in the fire load. We have to decide where the right places are to put apparatus."

But union leaders dispute the notion that a smaller population has reduced the need for services. "When people move out of town, they don't take their houses with them," Fire Officers Union Local 964 President Stephan Fugate says. Williams readily acknowledges that the city's estimated 50,000 vacant homes are frequently targets of arson. And Fugate notes that even as the city's resident population has dropped to about

700,000, the number of people here during the workday is nearly 1.5 million, "and it's not going down." Those still living here, firefighters contend, constitute a needier population than in the past--older, poorer, and more likely than their suburban neighbors to require an emergency vehicle to get to the hospital. (Baltimore leads the nation in medic-assistance runs by fire equipment, according to department officials.)

There are also Baltimore's budget realities to contend with. Mayor Kurt Schmoke says BCFD's downsizing "was done deliberately because the department was oversized." When he assumed office in 1987, the police department needed more personnel and the fire department was overstaffed, he says--"It was not a question of me ignoring [the BCFD] or choosing one public-safety agency over the other."

Schmoke acknowledges gaps in BCFD's current performance: "Could the department use some improvement? The answer is yes." But he maintains that, despite several successive years of budget trims, the fire department still "does serve the citizens well."

"We've done the best with what we have," says J. Hollis Albert III, a member of the city's Board of Fire Commissioners (commonly known as the fire board). "We've done a great job of managing our budget." But budget considerations make it impossible to maintain the staffing levels of a decade ago, fire officials say. "I have no control over the budget," Williams says. "I have \$95 million and I have to make it work."

Having to "make it work" has apparently taken its toll. According to a study commissioned by the fire board, it took, on average, 11/2 minutes for the first BCFD unit to arrive at the scene of a fire call in 1988. A 1996 response-time study by the two fire unions indicated the figure had doubled to three minutes. Battalion Chief Hector Torres, a BCFD spokesperson, now says the department is pleased with a recent study of its own showing that 85 percent of first-arriving units make it to a fire scene within five minutes.

Torres disputes that the purported drop in response times indicates "that we've lowered our standards." He notes that the 1988 study "was based on a hypothetical model"--predicting response times based on such factors as geography and traffic patterns--whereas the BCFD study tracked actual response times.

Firefighters and union sources cite several key factors contributing to what they characterize as a shortfall in services:

- **Staffing.** The department now has 1,411 firefighters, down from 1,664 in 1990. As a result, the unions contend, the department shells out nearly \$4 million a year in overtime. Union leaders fear the staff could shrink even further come October, when 595 firefighters are eligible to leave under the city's Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP), a program implemented in 1996 that offers police and fire personnel incentives to stay on the job beyond the standard 20 years. Williams estimates 100 to 125 of those firefighters will depart.

"We're months away from disaster," Fugate says. "It makes me think that cutting positions is the endgame for management." If firefighters leave faster than the department can replace them, he warns, the result could be more fire-company closures because of a lack of new personnel to replace retirees. Schmoke agrees, saying, "If everybody who is eligible left, we are not ready to replace them."

Since switching last year from a 14-week program at the Fire Academy to a four- to five-year apprenticeship program, BCFD has trained only 26 cadets. The apprentices earn \$18,000 a year (compared to \$25,000 for first-year firefighters) and they are qualified to drive ambulances and stand in for firefighters when necessary. Department officials say the program was instituted to encourage minority recruitment, but union leaders maintain it's designed to cut labor costs while ostensibly maintaining higher staffing levels.

Williams scoffs at the notion of a looming firefighter shortage. He cites a "contingency plan"--which Schmoke says he expects to see shortly--for filling soon-to-be-vacant positions. Although the chief offers few details, he does note a proposal to shorten the training process for certified paramedics who wish to become firefighters, thus filling slots faster. He also will begin a new class of 25 apprentices on May 4, he says.

As for overtime, Williams does not blame personnel shortages, but a union-negotiated "first choice" vacation plan that he says mandates days off at an employee's whim. Fugate says that's not true. "It's a management problem," he says. Since each firefighter in a company is assigned a rotation number within that company, he says, "only certain guys can take vacation on certain days. It works out to about one-sixth of a shift [50 to 60 firefighters] eligible [for vacation] on any given day. The number of guys taking vacation is something the department can generally figure out, if it wanted to. If we weren't understaffed, we wouldn't need to spend so much on overtime."

- **Equipment availability.** In 1995 and '96, BCFD tried to keep overtime costs down by closing some firehouses during certain shifts. Such "rotation closures" became controversial when fires broke out near firehouses that were temporarily shut down. The department dropped the idea, but some firefighters now claim BCFD has continued a variation on the policy, shutting down up to four pieces of firefighting apparatus daily for "preventive maintenance" at its Key Highway repair yard, which is operated by the Department of Public Works. "We call it 'pretend maintenance,'" says Fugate. "It's done for the same reasons as the rotation closures--to hold down overtime. . . . It's all a shell game."

Torres says only one unit is shut down daily for maintenance. "There was a belief that we were using preventive maintenance so that we wouldn't have to man all of our equipment," he says. "That's simply not true." Previously, he adds, fire equipment was sent to Key Highway with a full staff, but "Chief Williams decided in 1995 or 1996 to [send] the firefighters to other stations where firefighters were needed." Torres acknowledges that not every piece of equipment sent to the repair yard gets maintenance: "It's not done sometimes [due to] the shop's priorities."

In addition, up to four pieces of firefighting equipment may be closed daily in the event of a "red medic alert," during which firefighters assigned to those companies will man one of the BCFD's four reserve ambulances in times of heavy ambulance demand. As a result, the department's current stock of 62 engines and trucks--down from 90 in the 1970s and below the 66 to 70 pieces of equipment recommended for BCFD by a 1988 fire board--commissioned study--could dip as low as 57 on any given day.

· **Ramshackle firehouses and low morale.** Many firefighters point to peeling paint, asbestos, leaky roofs, inoperable heating systems, and broken floors at firehouses as evidence of city neglect. One says the dilapidated working conditions affect morale. "It's a constant reminder that we're on a sinking ship," says the firefighter, who requested anonymity. (Because BCFD is a quasimilitary operation, many firefighters asked that their names be withheld for fear of disciplinary action.) The last new firehouse in the city, at Garrison Boulevard and Liberty Heights Avenue, was built in 1990, before Williams took over the department. The chief says that a 1995 city bond issue will result in a new station at Kirk Avenue and East 25th Street, and two other stations are in the works.

Williams bristles at suggestions that morale has any impact on fire service: "When the [fire gong] goes off--no matter all the complaining--they go out and do their jobs."

Firefighters agree that morale questions have no place at the fire scene, but they say it does affect them. Fire-board member Delaphine Henson contends that better equipment and new uniforms have helped firefighters feel better about their jobs, but the rank and file say they'd prefer more substantive recognition. Most firefighters say that they never see Williams unless there is a big fire and news cameras are present, a reputation that has led to negative comparisons to Police Commissioner Thomas Frazier. "He's our flash-bulb Frazier," says Lt. David Bilenki, who has served 31 years and retires in June.

As an example of headquarters' insensitivity leading to rank-and-file discouragement, Bilenki points to Williams' awarding of citations to the Fire Prevention Bureau because of a decreasing number of fire deaths. Firefighters in the field felt slighted because it was largely they, not Prevention Bureau staffers, who went door to door throughout the city delivering smoke detectors. "That's a morale builder for you," Bilenki says sarcastically.

City Council member Lois Garey (D-1st District) believes morale problems make BCFD jobs less desirable for some who would once have considered a career in the department. "In the past," she says, "we've seen second- and third-generation firefighters. I'm not sure we'll see that for much longer."

At the heart of the matter, internal department critics say, is a lack of respect from City Hall. According to sources close to the situation, Schmoke ditched his three original appointees to the fire board in 1992 because they were too active in discussing budget matters, then sought a board--the current one--that would merely be "advisory." In 1996, a City Charter amendment that Schmoke had pushed for years made the fire chief accountable to the mayor, not the board, which previously had the authority to fire the chief. Critics contend the changes created a cozy relationship among Williams, Schmoke, and the board, leaving no one from within the department to fight the administration over the budget. With such staunch BCFD defenders as Mary Pat Clarke, Joseph DiBlasi, and Tim Murphy leaving the City Council in recent years, Schmoke has faced little sparring over cuts in the fire budget.

Ironically, the one area in which the department has quantitatively improved may have contributed to its fiscal troubles. "Ten years ago, fire deaths were way up [59 in 1988, compared to 24 last year], and we were the big guys, budgetwise," Bilenki says. "Now, crime captures all the headlines and the police are

the big guys."

The current state of affairs is a far cry from the BCFD's status for most of this century.

The department's modern history began in the aftermath of the legendary Great Fire of 1904. The rebuilding of the city after the devastating blaze included liberal increases in firehouses and equipment. Much of downtown's fire protection was then predicated on quick response by horse-drawn pumps and ladder companies, which meant that firehouses were relatively close to one another--sometimes no more than three or four blocks apart.

In the years following World War II, the by-then-mechanized BCFD maintained its saturated downtown presence while extending outward to what once were suburbs and farms. Faced with aging housing stock, a surfeit of industry, and a growing population, the department began developing a top-flight national reputation for interior firefighting (as opposed to the "surround-and-drown" technique) and almost instantaneous response-times.

The city's history and the BCFD's efficiency made the department a political sacred cow. As firefighters doused multi-alarm fires during the riots of 1968 and suspicious blazes around the waterfront in the early 1970s, their stature with the public grew. (Fire-department lore, long rumored but never proven, has it that the waterfront fires were an example of what one firefighter calls "urban removal"--alleged torching of buildings in areas slated for urban renewal, to avoid high demolition costs.)

The department was in its glory years, with nearly 60 fire engines, 30 trucks, five hose companies, 11 battalions, and numerous support staff. Supplemented considerably by federal revenue-sharing funds (which made up about half the department's budget in 1980 but dwindled until they were discontinued after fiscal year 1986), the department budget rarely fell victim to City Hall's knife. In a 1987 *Evening Sun* survey measuring public feeling about city agencies, only BCFD was rated "very good" by the paper's readers.

BCFD enjoyed a similar status in the national fire-services community. *Firehouse* magazine began holding its national expo in Baltimore annually--the better, expo literature touted, to see a world-class firefighting operation in action. A National League of Cities researcher told a fire-board member in 1988 that Baltimore owned, without question, the best department in the nation.

By the end of Mayor William Donald Schaefer's last term in the mid-1980s, however, talks of cutbacks had begun in earnest. A double house (in which both an engine and a truck reside) was closed amid controversy in Locust Point. Soon, many of the inner-city firehouses built shortly after the 1904 fire were closed or consolidated. City Hall, by then occupied by Schmoke, was met with only scattered resistance.

When Schmoke took office, he recalls, "I determined Baltimore had a bloated fire department. We were either number one or number two nationally in firefighters per capita. What I saw was a department in need of downsizing and improved efficiency." The mayor's plan to bring the department's size down to what he deemed an appropriate level barely ruffled political feathers, much less the public's, except in one instance when he attempted to close an engine company on Fort Avenue in South Baltimore.

"We're the most fire-sensitive city in the country," says David Glenn, president of the fire board from 1988 to 1992. "But even here not too many people get excited when a firehouse is closed--unless it's in their neighborhood."

Glenn's tenure as board president was marked by concerns over a flat fire-suppression budget, firehouse closings, racial equality in hiring, and the institution of a BCFD drug policy. Glenn is proud of his board's accomplishments, but he acknowledges that he and fellow commissioners Samuel Redd and Richard Jamison frequently ran afoul of Schmoke, who appointed them. "We did reasonable things," Glenn says, "but there were times when the mayor was peeved at me. I was a little too activist for him."

Redd, a West Baltimore mortician, says the board used its City Charter--backed powers to the fullest extent: "We did everything from riding with the guys on the equipment to talking with the unions to hearing appeals from disciplined firefighters."

According to Glenn, the tide turned for the board late in 1991, when a television reporter asked for his view of a proposed 20 percent reduction in BCFD funding. "I told him it would be catastrophic," Glenn recalls. "The next day, Schmoke calls [then--fire Chief Peter J. O'Connor] and says, 'What? Is [Glenn] trying to kill us?' even though I was O'Connor's superior." In January 1992, Schmoke told Glenn he would not be appointed to the board for a second term.

Redd speculates that the 1988--92 board "may not have been asked back so that Herman Williams could be named chief. There was talk that [the board] could hire from within, or do a national search. The City Charter read that we had the power to hire and fire. I don't know that Williams was high on our list."

A newly formed board of Harry Peaker, Delaphine Henson (wife of Housing Commissioner Daniel P. Henson III), and J. Hollis Albert III took over in February 1992, and Williams was appointed to the then-\$98,000-per-year job in April. (The chief's current salary is about \$116,000, according to the city budget office.) "I made clear to them that they were an advisory board," Schmoke says, "not a policy board."

Williams, father of TV talk-show host Montel Williams, is a former pump operator and battalion chief who had spent the previous 12 years as a supervisor in the city's Department of Transportation. He says when he assumed the chief's job he immediately started tackling the department's image problems, buying new equipment and dress uniforms for firefighters so they wouldn't look so "ragtag."

The newly reconstituted fire board played an entirely different role than that of its predecessors.

"The board is here to understand the department's problems and see what can be done to alleviate them," Peaker, the new board's president, said at a meeting on April 16, 1992, the day Herman Williams was appointed chief. It was apparently not there to deal with fiscal issues--minutes of board meetings indicate that any regular or detailed discussion of the department's budget problems ceased.

This is in marked contrast to the previous board, which, according to meeting minutes, would spend a good portion of its monthly gatherings heatedly discussing how to fight City Hall for more firefighting money or bemoaning the impending loss of department capacity wrought by budget cuts. During a Jan. 14, 1991 discussion of impending budget cuts, according to meeting minutes, Glenn "stated that the Board is suspending the policy that we are . . . charging the Chief with implementing the Mayor's policy"--in effect declaring that the department would spend as required to ensure fire protection without regard to the official budget.

With the advent of a new board so markedly quiet about budget matters came a new funding climate for BCFD. In Schmoke's first five budgets after his election in 1987, the department's budget kept pace with inflation. Starting with the fiscal year 1994 spending plan, however, the BCFD budget slipped behind

the inflation rate, and the gap has increased ever since. During most of this period the overall city budget has not merely kept pace with inflation, but grown faster than inflation.

Meanwhile, Schmoke has padded the budget for the police department--the other, bigger side of the public-safety sector--with spending increases that outpace inflation. Similarly, police department ranks have increased by 6 percent since 1988 compared to a 20 percent cut in BCFD's fire-suppression personnel (figure 2, page 18).

"Constituents scream out more about crime than anything else," council member Sheila Dixon (D-4th District) says. Where firefighting capacity is concerned, she says, "the issue is always brought up that we *do* have more than we need because the city's population is down."

But data compiled by the firefighters' unions indicate that despite the falling population, demand for BCFD services is on the rise. In 1980, when the city's population was almost 787,000, the department's fire-suppression units responded to 69,665 calls for service, according to the unions' studies. In 1995, when the city's population had fallen to barely more than 700,000, there were 101,968 such calls.

As noted by Fugate and others, three factors contribute to this phenomenon: the swollen daytime population; the growing number of aging, vacant homes in the city; and skyrocketing demand for emergency medical services. During busy times for city ambulances, fire equipment has to be dispatched to provide assistance until an ambulance can arrive. The incidence of such "medic assists" rose from zero in 1980 to nearly 39,000 in 1995.

Some council members maintain that even in the face of this demand, Williams has been less aggressive than his predecessor in fighting for budget dollars. "He's not as vocal as O'Connor," Dixon says. Garey agrees. "I would like to see the fire department advocate for itself more strongly," she says. "They're told, 'We're going to cut your budget,' and that's OK. The only furor is when the public becomes aware" of a shortage of fire service.

Council member Nicholas D'Adamo (D-1st District), however, asserts that the chief "will not be the puppet for the administration. At the beginning [the Schmoke administration] thought they might control him, but there's no controlling Herman Williams."

There is also a level of personal politics at work in the annual fire-department budget battle. Since Williams became chief, according to city-government sources, word around City Hall has been that he is out of favor with the mayor's inner circle and thus has little impact on budget decisions.

The chief also has had political problems with City Council. Former council member Joan Carter Conway, now a state senator, recalls cutting off a 1995 council hearing on the BCFD budget after butting heads with Williams, whom she says refused to answer tough questions on the department's fiscal management. Last year, the council cut \$600,000 from the department budget in what D'Adamo characterized as "a signal that the council wanted to send Herman Williams" that the department wasn't keeping council members abreast of plans in their districts. "We have to answer for what's going on in our districts," D'Adamo says, "and if we don't know what's happening it doesn't look good." He and Garey also assert that the council wanted to trim what it perceived as fat in BCFD's administrative budget. "There are too many chiefs and not enough Indians," Garey says.

For many rank-and-filers, the budget drought of recent years can have life-or-death consequences. In the early 1990s, the fire department tried cutting back from four-man crews on engines to three to save on personnel costs, despite being fought by the Glenn-led fire board. After a lieutenant died of a heart

attack after fighting a blaze on West Lombard Street, the department returned to four-man crews.

Bilenki contends--and some fire-safety groups agree--that keeping fire companies fully manned and response times short is more important now than ever. Today's fires, they say, become more deadly more quickly, due largely to the use of oil-based plastics in the manufacture of furniture, rugs, drapes, and appliances.

"Fires burn much hotter more quickly than they did 10 years ago," says Alan Caldwell, director of government affairs for the International Association of Fire Chiefs. The burning of those plastics also releases toxic gases that can kill people faster.

Caldwell sees a response time of four to six minutes as "good," but Bilenki says these faster-burning fires make speed of the essence for responding units, particularly at night when the residents of a burning home are likely to be asleep. "You see houses fully involved [in fire] in about two minutes now," he says. "It used to be five minutes."

Just as important as the response time, Bilenki contends, is its force. "Three minutes is good, but you need an engine and a truck there at the same time--not just the engine from around the corner." That's why firefighters beef so much about station closings, he says. Without a truck ventilating a building and searching for people trapped inside, an engine company is almost powerless to enter a building for fear of a "backdraft," or surge of fire. Conversely, a truck company can ventilate, but without an engine company to spray a fire with water, rescue is more difficult and firefighters more at risk.

The station closures have made meeting both response requirements difficult, Bilenki says, creating what he calls "holes" in fire service. One such hole may have been exposed in the Chauncy Avenue fire that claimed four lives. Engine companies on Druid Hill Avenue, Mount Royal Avenue, McCulloch and 21st Streets; a truck company on McMechen Street; and an aerial tower at North Avenue and Interstate 83--most of which would have responded on the first alarm to that blaze--had been shut down in the previous 11 years.

The first-alarm district for Bilenki's Engine 8 company, stationed on Lafayette Avenue near Gilmore Street in West Baltimore, has at times included parts of Greenmount and North Avenues, nearly two miles away. "One night," he says, "we were assigned on a first alarm in Hampden," four miles to the northeast. "It took us almost 15 minutes to get there."

Such concerns reflect some firefighters' convictions that the department's funding level will forever be tied to the numbers of fire deaths. In the absence of frequent fatalities, staff and equipment increases will remain a low priority for City Hall--a stance, some firefighters and department critics contend, that amounts to a game of Russian roulette.

"It's going to take a major catastrophe or two in a short period of time," David Glenn says, "to get people interested in the fire department again."