



CITY OF ATLANTA

City Auditor's Office
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Why We Did This Audit

City Council members have raised questions about Atlanta Fire Rescue Department staffing during budget hearings in the past few years. Between fiscal years 2008 and 2010, the city reduced the department's overall funding by 14% and eliminated 369 authorized, mostly vacant positions. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the international nonprofit that develops and disseminates standards for fire departments, established standard 1710 in 2001 recommending a minimum of four firefighters per engine company and ladder truck. Fire Rescue reports it usually falls short of this guideline. The city received a SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) grant to fund 75 new firefighters for three years starting in fiscal year 2012, which is intended to achieve the staffing goal.

What We Recommended

The Fire Chief should:

- target additional resources – personnel and equipment – to underserved areas and to stations with more out-of-area responses
- reduce turnout time through training, and measuring and reporting fire company performance
- reiterate and enforce procedures to ensure that unit reports entered into the reporting system are completed promptly and accurately

We plan to:

- evaluate E911 to understand why call transfer times are high
- evaluate dispatch to assess whether more staff would reduce time to dispatch calls

For more information regarding this report, please contact Amanda Noble at 404.330.6750 or anoble@atlantaga.gov

Performance Audit:

Firefighter Staffing

What We Found

Staffing each engine and truck with a minimum of four firefighters will not improve response time for the majority of incidents. The primary benefit of staffing a minimum of four firefighters on each engine and truck is to increase efficiency in handling fire incidents. At least four firefighters are needed on the scene to begin to contain a structure fire safely and effectively. Quicker responses reduce property damage and the chance of injury or loss of life. The standard has two components: the number of firefighters deployed and the time to respond.

The typical time to respond to a priority 1 call in 2010, including call processing and dispatch, exceeded benchmarks by nearly two minutes. About 75% of the department's responses between 2008 and 2010 were for emergency medical services, for which the NFPA has not recommended a minimum staffing level. For the 14% of the department's responses that required two or more units, the median time before the second unit arrived on the scene was 70 seconds.

Adding enough firefighters to meet NFPA 1710 would cost \$7.2 million per year to start. While the SAFER grant will delay when the city incurs the cost, the city is obligated to fund the positions for one year after the grant ends. Escalation in recruitment, salary, and benefit costs will increase future costs; adding engines, trucks or stations will also increase future staffing costs.

Investing resources in options other than increased minimum staffing would have a greater impact on response time:

- In 2010, a unit other than the one geographically closest was dispatched to 19% of the incidents, adding 86 seconds to the median response time. Renovating and/or replacing stations to add a company to stations with higher call volumes would improve coverage and decrease out-of-area responses.
- Turnout time in 2010 was three times longer than the benchmark of 60 seconds for 90% of EMS calls and 80 seconds for 90% of fire calls. Reducing turnout time through training and performance measurement would also improve response time.
- Adding dispatchers during periods of higher workload could reduce call processing time.
- In 2010, the median call transfer time was 2 minutes and 38 seconds compared to the 30 second benchmark for 95% of calls. Auditing E911 to assess why call transfer times are high could significantly cut citizen wait time.