An Inventory of the Needs and Perceptions of the Female Firefighters Of the Houston Fire Department

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

December 2006

Appendices Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at http://www.lrc.dhs.gov/ to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.

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ABSTRACT

The problem is that the Houston Fire Department has not completed an inventory of their female firefighters in order to see how the organization is doing at creating a working environment that fully utilizes their skills and knowledge while addressing any of their special needs. This study will complete this inventory while it answers the following research questions: 1) Do the female firefighters in the Houston Fire Department view the recruiting process as being fair to female candidates? 2) Are the female firefighters treated with respect and equity in their career as Houston Firefighters? 3) Have the female firefighters been given the proper "tools" in order to function successfully in this job today and in order to properly prepare them for their career development? 4) What is the overall consensus among the Houston female firefighter population concerning their decision to become Houston Firefighters?

Using a descriptive survey, the entire population of female firefighters, were asked a series of questions in order to get their views of how the Houston Fire Department is doing to meet the needs of the women of the department. Out of 103 female firefighters, 51 one of them submitted answers to the survey for a total of nearly 50% of the population.

What was discovered is that the women of the Houston Fire Department do view the recruiting process as being fair to women. They feel like they are overall treated well in the department, but reports of mistreatment and abuse were reported by some respondents. For the most part the female firefighters have done very well with their opportunities to promote within the department and feel that the tools to succeed have been provided by the organization. Finally, the survey showed that the female firefighters are mostly very happy with their decision to join the department.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE

Certification Statement……2

Abstract……3

Table of Contents……4

Introduction……..5

Background and Significance……..6

Literature Review……...…10

Procedures……..19

Results……24

Discussion……..27

Recommendations……..31

References……..35

Appendix 1: Survey……...37-44

Appendix 2: Question 10……45

Appendix 3: Question 12……...46-47

Appendix 4: Question 14……...48-49

Appendix 5: Question 18 Graph……50

Appendix 6: Question 19……51

Appendix 7: Question 23……52

Appendix 8: Question 30…….....53-55

INTRODUCTION

The problem is that the Houston Fire Department has not completed an inventory of their female firefighters in order to see how the organization is doing at creating a working environment that fully utilizes their skills and knowledge while addressing any of their special needs. This study will gather information from the female Houston firefighters' population in order to gauge their job satisfaction and their approval rating of the environment in which they work. If problem areas are identified, it is hoped that solutions can be discovered that can help alleviate these concerns. If no problems are uncovered then recommendations may be developed that can help to continue meeting the needs of these firefighters and ,perhaps, even share some of the successful strategies used to meet these needs with other fire department organizations.

Using descriptive research, a series of questions were developed in a survey form and the female members of the Houston Fire Department were asked to respond to them. These questions sought to discover the adequacy of the treatment of the female firefighters from the time that they were recruited into the department to today. It strives to ascertain their perceptions of the recruiting process, life as a female firefighter in the fire station, their experiences with career development and the promotional process, and their decision to become a Houston Firefighter. It is hoped that this look into the life of being a female member of a very male-dominated career choice will give clarity to any changes needed which could positively impact the careers of these firefighters. The research questions that this study intends to address are:

1) Do the female firefighters in the Houston Fire Department view the recruiting process as being fair to female candidates?

2) Are the female firefighters treated with respect and equity in their career as Houston Firefighters?

3) Have the female firefighters been given the proper "tools" in order to function successfully in this job today and in order to properly prepare them for their career development?

4) What is the overall consensus among the Houston female firefighter population concerning their decision to become Houston Firefighters?

BACKGROUND and SIGNIFICANCE

The Houston Fire Department protects an area of approximately 621 square miles and two major airports utilizing 99 fire stations and 3,672 firefighters. The firefighters work a four-shift 24 hour workday which averages out to about 52 hours a week. The department provides fire protection, fire prevention, fire investigation, rescue services, hazardous material services, airport crash and rescue services, and emergency medical services (both response and transport). The EMS providers are dual trained in both fire fighting and EMS. The Houston Fire Department answered 131,786 fire-related calls and 459,121 emergency medical service calls in 2005. (HFD website-statistics) This year will probably be even higher in call volume because of the influx in the population of Houston due to the housing of the displaced storm victims who settled in our city after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast.

"Today some 6,200 women in the U.S. work as career firefighters and officers, with perhaps 40,000 in the volunteer, paid-on-call, part-time and seasonal sectors." (Women in the

Fire Service, 2006, p. 1) For the Houston Fire Department, the phenomenon of hiring female firefighters is somewhat new. The first female firefighter was hired in 1975 and then it was not until 1982 until another one was hired. By the end of 1987, these two firefighters were still the only female firefighters in the Houston Fire Department. (Houston Fire Department Yearbook 1838-1988). In the 1995 Houston Fire Department Yearbook there were 48 female firefighters listed. (Houston Fire Department Yearbook 1895-1995) By the time the 2000 Houston Fire Department Yearbook was published, there were 64 female firefighters listed including one who had died in a fire at a McDonalds Restaurant on February 14, 2000. (Houston Fire Department Yearbook 2000) Today there are 103 female firefighters ranging in rank from Firefighter to Senior Captain with the ranks of the department going as follows: Probationary Firefighter, Firefighter, Engineer/Operator, Captain, Senior Captain, District Chief, Deputy Chief, Assistant Fire Chief, Executive Assistant Fire Chief, and Fire Chief. The ranks of Assistant Fire Chief, Executive Assistant Fire Chief, and Fire Chief are appointed positions appointed by the mayor. The other ranks are Civil Service designated positions. There are other classified ranks with different titles in other divisions such as Arson, Inspection, and Communications which coincide with these ranks above and are at the same pay grade.

In order to qualify for a promotion into a rank above Firefighter, a firefighter must have at least two years experience in the rank below the one being sought and come out high enough on a written test in order to fill an opening in the new rank prior to the exhaustion of the list due to a time limit. The time limit for a promotional list is two years. There are six female members at the Senior Captain Equivalency level of the department which includes three Senior Captains in suppression, two Senior Investigators in arson, and one Senior Inspector in the Inspection Division. Twenty-one female firefighters have reached the level

of Captain or equivalency including sixteen Captains in suppression and two Communication Captains, one Inspector in the Inspection Division, and one Investigator in arson. This means that twenty-seven of the female firefighters (26%) today are in a supervisory position. There have also been thirty-four female firefighters who have been promoted to Engineer/Operators. The other forty-two female firefighters remain in the rank of Firefighter. At this time the Houston Fire Department does not have any female firefighters in the rank of Probationary Firefighter. The female firefighters have been very successful in the department's promotional system with 59% achieving a promotion through the Houston Fire Department promotional testing system.

The Houston Fire Department was established in 1838 and took nearly 137 years before the first female firefighter was hired. During this 100 plus years of history the job of fighting fires was considered a man's profession. It was considered too physically demanding to allow for the appointment of women to do the job. Today women make up only about three percent of the entire department, with many members of the department believe that they still do not belong in this profession.

If the Houston Fire Department aspires to be a model of the large fire department of the future, they must embrace the idea of recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce including women firefighters. Each member of a department brings special skills, knowledge and sensitivities to their department. In addition to already proving that they can successfully do the job of a Houston Firefighter, the female firefighters bring with them a better understanding and a more keen sensitivity toward the female population that is being served by the Houston Fire Department. They also seem to excel at dealing with the young and older customers that they serve. For the Houston Fire Department to achieve greatness, it must be assured that quality female firefighters are recruited and retained.

If the Houston Fire Department is committed to retaining high quality female firefighters into the future, steps must be taken to ensure that these firefighters are given a workplace conducive to fair and equitable treatment of the female firefighters. In order to know where we should go in the future it is essential to know how the organization is meeting the needs of their female population today. Armed with this information, the Houston Fire Department can take steps to alleviate any obstacles to creating an environment where female firefighters feel welcome and are allowed to fully participate in the organization's mission.

In the National Fire Academy's course "Executive Leadership", a linkage can be found between the course material and this research problem. "Executive Leadership" challenges the fire service leaders to do the right thing and to be agents of change. Promoting a positive work environment for females to excel as firefighters within the Houston Fire Department is the right thing to do for several reasons. First, it is the law that an employer should not discriminate against the hiring, retention or promotion of employees based upon gender. Second, it is good for the community that is served to provide them with firefighters possessing the special skills, knowledge and sensitivities possessed by many of the female firefighters. And finally, it is the right thing to do for the females who would like to work within the fire service. The "Executive Leadership" course also proclaimed the importance of succession building as a leadership skill. It is important for the Houston Fire Department to be certain that the female firefighters will be ready to lead the organization in the future. The "Executive Leadership" course workbook spoke of "The Four Stages of Professional Careers" (Dalton Model), in which a career is traced from apprenticeship to sponsorship. It is the leader's responsibility to ensure that each of their employees is

prepared to move through this model and find a level of competency where the organization is rewarded by the work being performed by this individual.

The issue of female firefighters in the Houston Fire Department is over 30 years old and certainly not new. However, it is still a hotly debated topic within the fire stations of the city of Houston and within the fire service as a whole. Anytime that it is a goal to create an environment where a group of firefighters will be able to more effectively perform their duties, the mission of the first three operational objectives of the United States Fire Administration will be supported. These operational objectives are: 1) To reduce the loss of life from fire in the age group 14 years old and below. 2) To reduce the loss of life from fire in the age group of 65 years old and above. 3) To reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters. However, this topic most closely aligns with the fifth operational objective of the United States Fire Administration which is to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues. Issues of cultural modification and inclusiveness are issues that are emerging issues that are not only affecting the effectiveness and efficiency of the Houston Fire Department but issues that are relevant to the entire fire service. How organizations choose to handle the issue of women in the fire service can make this transition either very smooth and productive or very rocky and full of problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about the challenges and obstacles faced by women in the fire service. This literature review will look at some of the issues facing these women and address four separate areas regarding women in the fire service. First, it will answer the question of why it is important to diversify the workforce. Next, it will shed some light on several of the problems encountered by female candidates during their recruitment and

placement process. Third, it will discuss some of the obstacles experienced by women once they have entered the fire service. And finally, it will look at some of the opportunities that an organization can take advantage of to assure the successful assimilation of women in the fire service.

Why Diversify

Without diversity, an organization cannot truly reach its fullest potential of success. Each new employee brings with them a new set of skills, knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and values. "We should be looking at the total community and all of its citizens as a source of new members for our organization." (Smoke, 1999, p. 143) This expansion of our future population of firefighters is important for several reasons. First, it adds to the value-set gap possessed by the dominant group and brings in new ideas and new attitudes to the organization. "A good fire department must have both skilled and diverse employees to be truly forward and progressive." (Forte´, 2003p. 2) After all, it is because of these differences that the organization is benefiting from the new employees. "The new employees may have new perspectives on existing social problems, may be able to speak a second language, and may provide many other benefits that we lack." (Smoke, p. 143)

Next, with the baby-boomers beginning to leave the workforce and the number of candidates to choose from beginning to diminish, it is essential that all segments of the population be looked at as possible candidates for fire service positions. "This is significant because the demographics of the available labor force in America are becoming increasingly more diverse. According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women comprised 47% of the labor force in 2000 and are expected to increase to 48% by the year 2010. Furthermore, the white labor force will decline from 73% in 2000 to 69% in 2010." (Rawles, 2003, p.2) By limiting the candidate pool, the quality of the candidates is also limited.

Next, diversity is essential to a fire service organization's survivability due to reasons of public relations and political reality. Communities want to feel like they are being represented by the fire department that is serving them. "Public relations improve when a fire department can show the communities it serves that it values diversity." (Women in the Fire Service, 2006, p. 3) This translates into added value for the diverse fire department. This impacts the effectiveness of their outreach and safety educational programs. "This enhances the credibility and effectiveness of fire department outreach programs, from firefighter recruitment to community group liaisons, fire safety education and arson watch programs." (Women in the Fire Service (Supporting) p. 3) Finally, this impacts the amount of money received at budget time and the amount of money that can be asked for in raises for the organization's firefighters. "Every time a piece of apparatus goes out the door or a member of the public visits a fire station, the fire department advertises its support for diversity. The department can then effectively market a diverse emergency service to its communities." (Women in the Fire Service (Supporting), p. 3)

Finally, being a leader is not about doing what is the easiest, it is about doing what is right. Creating a diverse workforce is the right thing to do as a good leader. It is the right thing for the department, it is the right thing for the community being served, and it is the right thing for the women and other minorities who would like to pursue a profession in the fire service. "'The fire service is very rich in tradition, and I embrace that, but only to the point where it doesn't get in the way of moving toward the future,' Hayes-White said. 'The departments that, for whatever reason, have not embraced diversity – I just feel they're missing out.'" (Crary, 2005, p. 3) The cultural change needed for the diversity of a department to be successful starts at the top with a total commitment. "A department's mission statement and core values should contain statements about the importance of

diversity and inclusion." (Rawles, p. 2) As leaders we owe it to the segment of the population that is being disenfranchised to allow them to achieve their dream of being an accepted member of our organization. "We as leaders, who have influence, must respect and honor others. We certainly know how to show respect to rank, and we generally honor our "customers" when they are in need. For me the rule is simple. Treat others the way I would like to be treated, and treat others more highly than myself." (Small, 2004, p. 1) Finally, achieving a successful mix of firefighters within an organization tells the world that you are a true leader and worthy of the position of trust that you have been given. "Their success is your success, not just a pat on the back because you did it right, but because they are able to bring their skills and talents to play – not blocked by discrimination or turned off by a hostile work environment." (Women in the Fire Service (Radical), 1997, p.3)

Recruiting Women

Up until the 1970's, there were no women working as professional firefighters. The job title was fireman and it was considered to be a very masculine physical job that required strength far exceeding the normal woman of the time. "'Firefighting is the last big macho stronghold,' said Maureen McFadden of Legal Momentum, an advocacy group monitoring the bias cases. 'As a society, we keep holding steadily to the notion of the brawny, mustachioed firefighter, even though physicality is less important to the job than it used to be.'"(Crary, p. 3)

For years the recruitment of new firefighters was mostly performed through the referral of friends or relatives of the firefighters in the station. This practice perpetuated the white male dominance of the firefighting profession. "Who is hired under these circumstances? People who were already looking for the firefighter jobs: sons and friends of

firefighters, volunteer firefighters, and a few others; few or no women. (Women in the Fire Service (Radical), p. 1-2) This practice has been referred to in the term regimenting and it is well accepted how this can lead to the continuation of hiring the status quo. "The problem with regimenting is that it often provides an unfair advantage to those who have department contacts over those who don't, such as minorities or women." (Crawford, p. 1)

Many firefighters know from a very early age that what they want to do with their life is to serve the public as a professional firefighter. "There are essentially two groups in the fire service, those who choose and those who are chosen. The individuals who choose to seek a position in the fire service are highly motivated, often through family members, friends, personal experience or even reruns of the television show *Rescue 911*." (Crawford, 2002, p.1) The other group is the individuals who are just seeking an occupation that seems to be a good profession. "The second group to land careers in the fire service are those who are chosen. In many instances, these are people who happen upon the fire service, often having obtained enough information through a school job fair or department advertisement to apply and, if necessary, test for a firefighter position." (Crawford, p. 1) In the article "Fair Warning" by Brian A. Crawford, the view that somehow an organization should value these candidates who choose to be firefighters over those who are chosen is set forth. "Logic, tells us that if a person is considering the fire service as a career and is exposed to the technical and physical demands of the job –even if only in the classroom – they are better prepared than those who aren't exposed at all. Those who have no idea what the fire service is may have trouble adapting to the physical and mental demands, ultimately leading to unhappiness with their career choice." (Crawford, p.2) While, on the surface, this logic seems to make sense, the article does admit that some groups of society may be more likely to aspire to be

firefighters, and take steps toward the certification process, than others especially sense society has just begun to admit certain groups into the fire service. "Because of low minority numbers applying for firefighter positions, Gainesville (Fla.) Fire and Rescue is currently revising their practice of requiring the state's firefighter certification prior to hire. According to District Chief Bill Northcutt, the department experienced poor minority involvement in the hiring process due to the certification requirement forcing them to change from using a certified firefighters list only, to a certified and non-certified list." (Crawford, 2004, p. 3)

For many years, the entrance physical examinations, used by the fire service, kept all but a few women applicants from being accepted to enter into most fire departments. "Prior to the 1990's, the department's testing system consisted primarily of strength and endurance measurements that didn't accurately predict success on the job, and culturally biased written tests that had nothing to do with the job of firefighting." (Forte´, p.1) Today any physical fitness testing must be able to pass the scrutiny of whether or not the testing truly tests for the abilities needed to perform the job. This is important for both ensuring that the department can capture the largest candidate pool as possible and to maintain a set of requirements necessary to perform the duties of the job. "How well an employee is matched to a job affects the amount of the employee's work. Workers who are unable to produce the expected amount and quality of work can cost an organization a great deal of money and time." (Woodard, 2002, p.3) This push to provide a testing system that was validated as a testing instrument of the actual skills and physicality necessary to perform the job of firefighting while reducing the adverse impact of some of the tests used in the past, has prompted the development and use of the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT). "'[This joint task force] worked closely with the Justice Department,' Shaitberger said, 'to create a test that will help ensure new firefighter candidates are more physically capable of firefighting, while

making it possible to improve the diversity of the fire service.'" (Elliot, 2001, p.1) This test has been shown to be quite challenging to most female firefighters initially. But with programs in place to allow candidates time to work on their problem areas prior to taking the test, the success rate among women has risen. "Jill Young, a 10-year veteran firefighter with the Fairfax County (Va.) Fire & Rescue, helped validate CPAT in Phoenix. 'I know there are a lot of women who believe CPAT hurts women's chances to join departments, but it's a fair test of the job,' she said. 'It requires a lot of upper-body strength, which generally is harder for women to achieve. It's a hard test, but it's attainable for women." (Elliot, p.3)

Workplace Issues

The Equal Employment Act of 1972 is clear in stating that it is unlawful to unfairly discriminate against anyone in matters of employment. "The law prohibits actions that 'on their face' treat 'protected' classes (minorities, women) unfairly. If the requirements of a job seem to disqualify women, for example, the employer must show that the standards are a 'bona fide occupational qualification' (BFOQ); otherwise they will be struck down." (Morgan & England, 1996, p.293) Studies have shown that most female candidates for the job of firefighter and the females who are currently working in the job generally avoid using the court system. "In reality, most women who are discriminated against, whether in hiring or in the job, don't file a complaint." (Women in the Fire Service, 1997, p.2) Almost all the female firefighters will feel the affects of acceptance issues and other types of abuse while silently doing the jobs that they are trained to do. "Some of the rest of the women, probably the majority, will survive, often at a great cost to themselves: over-adapting in order to be accepted, putting up with any harassment that may occur, and hiding or denying the resulting stress." (Women in the Fire Service, 1997, p. 2)

Besides facing issues of acceptance, female firefighters also face the very real problem of sexual harassment which can exhibit itself in two types of situations. "A hostile work environment occurs when there are pictures, comments, and other offensive acts that inhibit a workers performance. A second situation occurs when one asks for sexual favors as a condition of employment, promotion, or transfer." (Smoke, p. 144) Studies have shown that this type of harassment can have both physical and mental consequences to those who are forced to endure it. "Workplace discrimination and sexual harassment can have negative psychological and physical affects on their victims." (Rawles, p. 1) Harm from sexual harassment extends even further into the organization. "Research has shown that men who are members of these work groups or organizations in which female co-workers are being harassed report lower job satisfaction and greater psychological distress. These men exhibit greater organizational withdrawal behaviors, including absenteeism, plans of quitting the job, and missing work meetings." (Rawles, p.1)

Women also have to deal with issues deriving from a lack of privacy in the facilities that they are assigned to work.

> Providing private facilities for each gender has been solved through many approaches, including use of unisex restrooms, dedicated male and female restrooms, and separate restrooms for each sleeping room. The Bakersfield fire station facilities program implemented unisex restrooms in its first project. However, the program later learned that more privacy is desired. According to Blair, 'It is awkward for women firefighters to use the unisex restrooms with the majority of the male firefighters.' (McGrath, 2005, p.1-2)

Applying the one size fits all way of thinking when budgeting for Personal Protection Equipment, women firefighters are sometimes faced with safety equipment that does not fit

correctly and which will not function fully as manufactured. There is also an issue of being "bullied" on the job. "A greater proportion of women (11.4%) reported being bullied compared to men (9.9%)." (Hoel & Cooper, 2000, p.12)

There are also the issues of not feeling welcome, not feeling like they are being listened to by their coworkers, and not feeling as valued as their male counterparts by the organization. "Nearly one in five women firefighters surveyed said they were 'often' treated differently from and worse than their male counterparts because they were female." (Women in the Fire Service, 1997, p. 4) This difference in treatment sometimes can manifest itself in the way they are prepared in training and for career development. "Forty-five percent of the women responding to the survey (246 women) said they had been denied training, promotion or special assignments because they were female." (Women in the Fire Service, 1997, p. 4)

Opportunities for Success

Several key elements of successfully assimilating women into the fire service are now understood and practiced by some progressive departments. First, it is well understood that in order to fully utilize the female segment of the population within an organization, it requires a cultural change that can only be brought about by a total commitment from the top of the organization. "'You have to change the department from the top down,' Walsh said, 'You've got to show people you want them.'" (Crary, p.1) Next, assure that the standards in place are truly fair and receptive to the entire population that is targeted. "The department revamped the entire testing system in 1995, validating the reading comprehension and physical components for job-relatedness and content." (Forte´, p. 1) Create opportunities for networking and mentoring within the organization and a means in place for career development and succession building. "It is recommended that guidance is provided which will facilitate the setting of career goals and develop a plan to achieve them." (Rolph, 2000,

p. 34) Finally, diversity training should be provided to the membership of the organization and the commitment for the acceptance of diversity within the department must be communicated loudly through the policies created and the actions taken by the department to assure the compliance of these policies. "This research confirms that diversity training is effective in changing employees' knowledge, attitudes and skills and that perceived success depends on, at a minimum, on-going training." (Morgan, 2002, p.2)

PROCEDURES

Using a descriptive research method a survey was created and administered through an online-survey company called "Free Surveys Online.com" (See Appendix 1). An announcement was sent out, through the Houston Fire Department Public Information Office, to all Houston fire stations and divisions on all shifts, which requested that all female, firefighters voluntarily answer a survey on-line and anonymously submit their responses. The survey consisted of multiple choice questions, simple yes or no questions, and open-ended questions. The questions were derived from this author's perceived set of issues facing the women of the fire service. The data was compiled and collated by the on-line service. A reminder announcement was sent out after the first week to help get the message out to as many female firefighters as possible. At the time of the second announcement there were 22 responses to the survey which was about 21% of the targeted female firefighter population. A 14 day time period was allowed for the responses to be entered. This time period was formulated to allow for as many of the target population as possible, to find out about the survey and to enter their responses.

Of the 103 female firefighters in the department, 51 of them responded to the survey for a total of 49.5% of the targeted population. Of the female firefighters answering the

survey, 43.1% of the surveys were answered by female firefighters in the rank of Firefighter. The actual percentage of females in this rank is 40.7%. 23.5% of the females who answered the survey are currently in the rank of Engineer/Operator. The actual percentage of female firefighters in the rank of Engineer/Operator is 33%. 21.6% of the respondents held the rank of Captain. The actual percentage of female firefighters holding the rank of Captain is 20.4%. Finally, 11.8% of the respondents answering this survey hold the rank of Senior Captain. The actual percentage of female firefighters holding the rank of Senior Captain is 5.8%.

Limitations

It can be seen that this survey lacked the randomness to create a perfect microcosm of the female firefighter population in the Houston Fire Department. The female firefighters holding the rank of Senior Captain actually all answered this survey. Interestingly, a larger percentage of those female members in the rank of Firefighter also answered the survey. All the other ranks were slightly under-represented by this survey. Explanations for this phenomenon seem to be self defeating. One could argue that the Senior Captains have greater access to the department messaging system and, therefore, that is why 100% of the female firefighters at the Senior Captain level submitted the survey. Further, it could be argued that this higher percentage was due to the fact that these firefighters are some of the most motivated female members of the department so that when they are asked to complete a task, it gets completed. However, the fact is that the lowest ranking female firefighters at the Firefighter rank also exceeded their “quota” of completed surveys. Upon introspection, it would seem that all the above reasons for the greater percentage number of Senior Captains responding to the survey are all correct and the reason for the higher number of members in the Firefighter rank response is due to both their personal motivation level and the fact that

they were more than likely told by their officers about the survey and the need to fill it out. After all, members in the rank of Firefighter are very likely to do as they are told when they are directed to do a task by a member of the officer rank. Members in the rank of Engineer/Operator enjoy more of a peer-type relationship with their officers and would not feel as much pressure to respond.

In spite of this disparity in the randomness of the survey instrument, it appears that the conclusions that can be gathered from this survey are valid and representative of the opinions held by the population as a whole. While it is true that the view of the experiences of being a Houston Firefighter may differ for members of the department who have achieved success in the promotional system versus those members who have not had the same success, it still seems that the female members in the rank of Senior Captain have experienced all the same challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated organization. Since the emphasis of this study is to inventory the views of the female firefighters, it seems likely that the data for this study will be relevant and valid.

Besides the limitation of not truly gaining a cross-sampling of our population to be studied, other limitations were also noted. First, because of the need to offer complete anonymity for those who participated in this survey, there is no true way to guarantee that unauthorized members of the department did not participate in this survey. If a male member of the Houston Fire Department felt the need to influence the results of this survey, then they could have done so without knowledge of this author. Looking over the data, it appears that only one truly "outrageous" response to the survey could be detected. This person gave as their response to the question number 30 as to why they would become a Houston Firefighter again if they had to do it over again, "I'm a lazy girl and this is a good job to have babies and hang out downtown and do nothing." The answers submitted by this respondent were not

believed to be taken seriously so they were removed from this study. This decision to remove this response that was found among the 52 responses submitted was because it perpetuated a sexist stereotype that female firefighters only became firefighters so that they could get pregnant and work in staff positions. Further, it was believed to have been submitted by a male member of the department.

The other limitation was the way the population was informed about the survey. The Houston Fire Department has a good system of keeping everyone informed about important issues happening within the department through the Outlook Messaging System. This system, however, depends heavily on the downward flow of the information through the officers to the subordinates below. If the officers do not feel the message needs to be passed down the ranks, then the lower ranking members of the department will not hear about the information. Many of the officers may not have thought that the information concerning the female firefighter survey was important enough to pass on to their female subordinates. Therefore, many of the female firefighters may not have known of the request for them to answer the survey. In fact, the administration made the decision to pull the announcement concerning this survey toward the end of the two week period, because of concerns over legal actions pending concerning EEOC matters. By this time, however, 51 surveys had been submitted and accepted for this study.

Definitions

The following terms may require definitions:

Probationary Firefighter: Rank of new firefighter during their first two years training period in the department. Once the two years is over, the firefighter is automatically promoted to the rank of Firefighter.

Firefighter: Rank of firefighter who does most of the labor both around the station and at the emergency scene.

Engineer/Operator: First promotional rank requiring promotional test. The Engineer/Operator functions in the position of driver and operator of the vehicle or apparatus that they are assigned.

Captain: The next rank after Engineer/Operator requiring promotional testing. The Captain supervises the work performed both at the station and by the crew on the engine or ambulance that he/she is assigned. In suppression the captain is assigned to an engine/pumper.

Senior Captain: The next rank after Captain requiring a promotional test. The Senior Captain supervises the Captains under his/her command. In suppression the Senior Captain is assigned to a ladder truck.

District Chief: The next tested position after Senior Captain. Oversees a group of between four to six fire stations in both emergency and non-emergency times.

Deputy Chief: The next tested position after District Chief. There are Deputy Chiefs that hold staff positions over the training academy and the Emergency Medical Division. There is also a Deputy Chief on each of the four shifts that is the Shift Commander. This Shift Commander oversees the work of the District Chiefs and responds on large fire and emergency events to provide support and supervision.

Assistant Fire Chief: Appointed staff positions over most of the divisions. There are seven of these Assistant Fire Chiefs.

Executive Assistant Fire Chief: Appointed to staff positions to oversee the work done by the Assistant Fire Chiefs. There are three of these Executive Assistant Fire Chiefs.

RESULTS

Question number one points out that over half of our population of female firefighters in the Houston Fire Department have over 10 years of service with the department. Question number two determined the rank of the surveyed members. 56.9% of this population has been promoted to a rank above the rank of Firefighter. Question number three dealt with the race of the female firefighters. In the population studied it was found that about 54.9% of those who submitted surveys were other than white females.

Question number four dealt with the ability of the female firefighters to acquire the needed skills and knowledge base to prepare themselves for their next promotional position. 84.3% believed that they were allowed to acquire these skill and knowledge bases.

Questions five and six further dealt with the promotional system. Question five asked if the respondent planned to take the promotional test in order to attempt to promote to the next rank. Of those responding, 82.7% said that they did plan to take a promotional test. In question number six, the respondents were asked if they thought the promotional system for the Houston Fire Department was equally fair to men and women firefighters. The respondents were 90.2% in agreement that the promotional system was fair to both genders.

In question number seven, it was asked if they felt that the Houston Fire Department has been sensitive to the special needs of female firefighters. Of those responding, 25.5% believed that the department was sensitive to their special needs, 33.3% did not believe they were, and 41.2% did not believe that female firefighters had any special needs.

In question number eight the respondents were asked if they have been sexually harassed in their career, and 62.7% said that they had not. Question nine asked respondents who have been sexually harassed if they reported the incident. Although there were more responses than had answered yes in question eight, 86.7% reported that they did not report

the incident. Question ten was open ended and asked the respondents who stated that they did not report the incident in question eight, to state why they did not. The complete list of reasons given for not reporting the incidents are available in Appendix 2. Most of them had to do with the female firefighters' desire to "not make waves" or in a general lack of confidence that reporting the matter would do any good.

Question 11 through 14 dealt with other types of harassment. Question 11 asks the respondents if they have felt other types of harassment because they are women in a male-dominated profession. 58% said that they had not felt any other types of harassment. The 42% of the respondents, who stated that they had been harassed, were asked to state the circumstances of this harassment in question number 12. For a complete list of the types of harassment faced by these firefighters, go to Appendix 3. Most of the responses had to do with not getting an equal share of assignments, or not being taken seriously, or having to listen to the male firefighters talk about how women should not be allowed to be firefighters. Question 13 asked the respondents if they reported the harassment and 69.2% said that they did not. Question 14 asked them to state why they did not report the incident and the answers were consistent with the reasons stated in Question number 10. For a complete list of the answers given, refer to Appendix 4.

Question number 15 has to do with the female firefighters' assessment of the facilities provided at the fire stations. This question was split down the middle with 50% saying that the facilities provided for their use were adequate, and 50% saying they were not. This is reasonable since the facilities provided at the various stations throughout the city are in no way equal in the way that they accommodate both genders who work in a station. As new fire stations are built, a greater emphasis is placed on making the station cross-gender friendly.

Question number 16 asked if the respondents have found any males within the Houston Fire Department which they consider to be their mentors. 92.2% said that they have found mentors. In Question number 17 it was discovered that 85.4% of those responding stated that these mentors had been discovered in both their supervisors and their coworkers.

In Question number 18 the respondents were asked to choose any of the following that they believed negatively affected the job that they do as a female firefighter (See Appendix 5). The choices for this question included: physical limitations, mechanical aptitude limitations, gaining support for your ideas, career development limitations, lack of equal respect when placed in authoritative positions, training opportunity limitations, mentoring limitations, bullying on the job, discrimination, inappropriate advances, a feeling of unwelcomeness, and a lack of separate facilities. In Question number 19 the respondents were asked to add any other examples of things which they believe negatively affect the job that they do as female firefighters. For a complete list of these responses go to Appendix 6.

Question 20 inquired about their perceptions of the diversity training as given by the Houston Fire Department. 11.8% believed the diversity training was helpful and 27.5% believed that it was actually divisive for the cause of the acceptance of the female firefighters within the Houston Fire Department. 60.8% thought that the diversity training neither helped nor hurt the acceptance of female firefighters within the department.

Questions 21 through 23, pertains to the Recruiting process. Question 21 asked if they believed that the physical agility test that was being used to determine the qualifications of a trainee candidate, fairly assessed the desirability of hiring a female candidate. 74.5% of those responding believed that it was fair. Question number 22 asked if the recruiting process was fair and actively seeking female candidates. 86% of those responding believed that the process was fair and seeking female candidates. Question number 23 asked those

respondents who answered no to Question number 22 to state why they said no. For a complete list of these responses go to Appendix 7.

Question number 24 asked if they believed the struggle to juggle their family responsibilities with their work responsibilities was harder for them than their male counterparts. 57.1% said that they did not believe that it was harder for them than for the male firefighters. Question number 25 asked if they believed that their performance was subject to greater scrutiny than their male counterparts. 66% said that they did believe that their performance was monitored more closely than the performance of the male firefighters. Question number 26 asked them why they decided to become firefighters. 20.6% said they new at a very early age that they wanted to become a firefighter. 27.1% had family members or friends who were firefighters that influenced them to want to become one. 52.1% said that they needed a job and thought that being a firefighter may be pretty interesting. Question number 27 asked if the Houston Fire Department organization values men over women. 47.9% thought that it did.

Question number 28 asked if they were glad that they became a firefighter and joined the Houston Fire Department. 87.8% said they were glad that they became a Houston Firefighter. Question number 29 asks if they had it to do over again would they still become Houston Firefighters. 81.3% would do it all again. The final question gave the respondents a chance to say why they answered Question number 29 the way they did. For a complete list of the answers given for Question number 30, go to Appendix 8.

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey were quite interesting with several areas where the need for improvement are obvious and other areas where opportunities for change do exist (See

Appendixes 1-8). With 103 female firefighters in a department of over 3700, it can be seen that a bolstering of the diversity plan within the Recruiting Division should be undertaken. Further, question number one points out that over half our population of female firefighters in the Houston Fire Department has over 10 years of service with the department. Although this is not a contention for alarm, it does point out that earlier drives for diversity may have slowed down and should be examined for reimplementation. Question number two determined the rank of the surveyed members. Although this question was slightly over-represented by members in the rank of Senior Captain or equivalent, it does show that female firefighters of the Houston Fire Department have been successful in the promotional process. 56.9% of this population has been promoted to a rank above the rank of Firefighter. The male counterparts have only promoted to a rank above Firefighter in 50.7% of the time, which is slightly less than the female firefighters. Question number three dealt with the race of the female firefighters. This was important information because women who also belong to other minority groups may feel an added layer of disenfranchisement. In the population studied it was found that about 54.9% of those who submitted surveys were other than white females. Question number four received a positive response as to their preparation and their ability to acquire the needed skills and knowledge in order to go to their next promotional level. An overwhelming 84.3% believed that they were allowed to acquire these skill and knowledge bases. Their ability to prepare for the next level is very important to the organization's future and it is good that such a large percentage can say that they are prepared. Nearly 50% of the respondents believed that the Houston Fire Department values men over women. This is an area that could need some cultural attention in the future. The future of female firefighters attaining rank seems bright with an overwhelming number of the respondents saying that they planned to promote and that they thought the promotional

system was fair to women. One-third of those surveyed believed the Houston Fire Department was not sensitive to the special needs of the female firefighters, but, the rest believed either that the organization was sensitive or that the female firefighters did not possess any special needs. This still could use some work in the future.

Of the women surveyed, 37.3 % said that they had been sexually harassed in their career. This can be compared to other studies conducted among female firefighters. In a study commissioned by Women in the Fire Service in 1995, the following results were released on sexual harassment in the fire service. "…88% of fire service women responding – experienced some form of sexual harassment at some point in their fire service careers or volunteer time. Twenty-two percent of the women who reported one or more types of harassment said the harassment had occurred only in the past, which means nearly 70% of the women in the survey were experiencing ongoing harassment." (Women in the Fire Service, 1996, p. 2) This large number is further collaborated by the survey performed in the United Kingdom. "When this is considered alongside the 63.9% who suggest they have been harassed at work and the shaming ethnographic evidence provided by the survey (appendix eleven) this indicates an ill-conceived practice." (Rolph, p. 9) Given these higher rates in other surveys done on sexual harassment in the fire service, Houston can, perhaps, feel a bit relieved that the numbers in the survey were under 40%. However, a strategy to further reduce this abuse should still be the focus of the administration.

In Question number 9 of our survey it was pointed out that of those who have been sexually harassed, while serving in the Houston Fire Department, that nearly 87% stated that they did not report the incident. "141 women – 30% of the women who had been sexually harassed – had not filed a complaint or advised their department of the harassment, even though most of them had experienced harassment numerous times." (Women in the Fire

Service, 1996, p. 4) In the United Kingdom survey, "Women's reluctance to object is clearly identified within the survey where 63.9% acknowledged they had been harassed at work, but none of them had sought official assistance (appendix eleven)." (Rolph, p. 11) 42% of the Houston Firefighters surveyed stated that they had suffered other types of harassment due to their gender within the organization. "Forty-five percent of the women responding to the survey (246 women) said they had been denied training, promotion or special assignments because they were female." (Women in the Fire Service, 1996, p. 4) Further, "Nearly three-fourths of the women responding to the survey (404 women or 73%), said they had been treated differently from their male co-workers in negative ways due to gender; the vast majority (96%) more than once" (Women in the Fire Service, 1996, p. 4) Half of the Houston Firefighters surveyed stated that the facilities provided to them at the fire station is adequate. "It is difficult to perceive that women in any other occupation would accept such a lack of privacy on these occasions, and one would be interested to hear what Cockburn or Tung would have to say if they head to do this. More importantly the fact that 77.4% of the women have accepted such facilities as adequate supports the suggestion that will feature throughout this dissertation that women are subordinated by male power, and that this is reflected in their answers throughout the survey." (Rolph, p. 43)

In Question number 18 the respondents were asked to choose any of the following that they believed negatively affected the job that they do as a female firefighter (See Appendix 5). The choices for this question included: physical limitations, mechanical aptitude limitations, gaining support for your ideas, career development limitations, lack of equal respect when placed in authoritative positions, training opportunity limitations, mentoring limitations, bullying on the job, discrimination, inappropriate advances, a feeling of unwelcomeness, and a lack of separate facilities. Of these choices there were several that

seemed important enough for at least a ten percent response rate. These included physical limitations, lack of equal respect when placed in authoritative positions, discrimination, a feeling of unwelcomeness, and lack of separate facilities. All of these, therefore, should be looked at as areas where improvements can be made.

92.2% of the respondents from the Houston Fire Department reported having mentors who had helped them in their career. In the Rolph study, "This contrasted against the information from the operational fire-fighters who confirmed that only 4% of fire-fighters had mentors and only 12% were mentors for others." (Rolph, p. 27) In the Houston survey, only 11.8% believed that diversity training was effective in hastening the acceptance of the female firefighters within the Houston Fire Department culture. "Only six women (26.1%) considered the training was useful and ethnographic comments continue the negative picture (appendix nineteen). (Rolph, p. 12)

Probably the most positive aspects of the survey conducted with the female members of the Houston Fire Department, is the feeling amongst them that the entrance process and promotional process are fair to female candidates. This will help keep the door open for new female firefighters to enter the Houston Fire Department and present female firefighters to climb the rank structure into upper management. It is also encouraging that these firefighters are so passionate about their careers and are overwhelmingly happy that they chose the Houston Fire Department. Hopefully, members with negative experiences will not give up on the system and will help in making sure that it is totally inclusive in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first step that needs to be taken, in the Houston Fire Department, is to fully open up the conversation as to what the women are feeling while pursuing their career in this

department and any concerns felt by the men. An inventory should be taken of where the culture is right now and then a determination of where the organization wants the culture to be in the future must be found. This may require forming cultural exploratory committees made up of all segments of the Houston Fire Department population to determine strategies for changing the way the culture feels about diversity.

It is a simple reality that any new programs directed at fully assimilating the female firefighters into the Houston Fire Department, must begin at the top. The Fire Chief and his staff must be totally committed and believe that it is in the best interest of the department to fully assimilate women in the department. On the surface, when compared to other fire departments in other areas of the United States, the Houston Fire Department has done very well with the number of female firefighters recruited into the organization. The truth is, however, that the department has a long way to go in order to achieve the numbers that will make the women of the department feel more appreciated and to show the community that diversity of the department is important.

The recruiting process should be looked at to assure that the new trainees are found using the largest pool of qualified candidates as possible. All the testing and selection process must be checked for job relatedness and total fairness for all candidates. Consideration should be given to using the CPAT testing for the physical fitness aspect of the testing process.

Policies have been in place for years to protect those who are in one of the protected classes from discrimination and sexual misconduct. These policies must be enforced by creating an environment where misconduct will be reported because the person who has been abused will know that her complaint will be taken very seriously and that no repercussions will be directed at the one who makes the complaint. Following this, a full investigation will

take place and disciplinary action will be taken against members found to be in violation of the policies.

The Houston Fire Department has decided recently that in order to save money on the cost of diversity training, the training would be given in an on-line format rather than in an actual classroom setting. Even though the majority of the females surveyed did not feel like the diversity training was effective in helping them to become accepted within the department, it is critical that this training be continued and even expanded to include classroom instruction again. Further, there is need at the higher managerial levels for a "higher dose" of diversity training. This can be accomplished by bringing in experts from outside our department to hold classes for the chief officers and possibly even all officers of the department. The participation of the fire chief and his staff in these classes would also prove essential.

Structured Mentor programs should be created so that qualified firefighters and officers of the future can be prepared to take over their roles of leadership. These programs should marriage successful members of the department with other members so that the latter can benefit from their knowledge and experience. This program should include programs where the two are actually paired together and work some shifts together. This mentor should become a source for finding the solution to problems encountered in the future. Like so often is the case, one of the side benefits from this program will probably be that the mentor will find that their career is also enhanced by the lessons learned themselves while working with their charge.

The Houston Fire Department has a lot to be proud of when it comes to the assimilation of women in the department, but they also have a lot of opportunities to make improvements to the organization. The best news is that the department is composed of 103

female firefighters with the great majority of these, very motivated to be successful in their career and very happy that they became Houston Firefighters. This makes the job ahead much simpler since the members of the male-dominant culture have almost all seen that the department has benefited from the inclusion of females in the ranks of the Houston Fire Department. The future seems bright to open the door even wider in the future to more female candidates and to create an environment where these new firefighters will feel more welcome in their careers as Houston Firefighters. Cheryl Rolph had a quote in her dissertation paper for her Master of Science Degree titled, "Up the Greasy Hole", which sums up the emphasis of this paper.

> It's not that we think better than men, but that we think different. Its not women against men but women and men. Its not the world would have been better if women had run it, but the world will be better when we as women who bring our own perspective, share in running it. (Rolph, p. 4)

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