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By **PATRICK GALLAHUE** and **DAN MANGAN**

Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta yesterday took a flamethrower to two fire-union bosses - charging they're endangering lives by slowing firefighters' response times in a bid to increase staffing levels and stop firehouse closings.

"I believe your concerted effort to drive up response times...jeopardizes public safety and runs counter to the tradition of selfless service and dedication to the people of this city," Scoppetta wrote in a bombshell letter to the presidents of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association and the Uniformed Firefighters Association.

"This is the very worst kind of union action imaginable," he added.

UFA President Stephen Cassidy fired back, calling Scoppetta's letter "ridiculous" and suggesting that response times have increased because of the FDNY's efforts to eliminate accidents involving firetrucks.

"For the fire commissioner to blame me for increased response times is just plain silly," Cassidy fumed. "He must be under pressure from City Hall about response times, and he's looking for someone to blame."

UFOA President Peter Gorman called Scoppetta "a liar" and accused him of "not being able to manage his own department."

"I think it's a desperate act by a desperate man," Gorman said.

Citywide response times to all incidents averaged 5 minutes, 27 seconds from January to April of this year — a 22-second increase over the same period last year.

Response times to structural fires have increased an average of 18 seconds, and medical-emergency responses have increased 23 seconds.

Average citywide response times by FDNY units have increased in each of the last eight months, Scoppetta wrote, "a statistic that is both alarming and dangerous."

He also wrote that the unions have advised their members to "ignore department regulations and slow

down excessively in responding to incidents."

Citing union documents, he said the unions have told their members to make a full stop at red lights and stop signs before proceeding to fires and emergencies, even though FDNY regulations now allow fire vehicles to roll through red lights or stop signs after slowing down to make sure it's safe.

A damning passage Scoppetta claimed was from a union bulletin read, "The UFA and UFOA have been trying to get the message to all chauffeurs and officers for the past several months. Apparently, our message is getting out. Response times are climbing."

In an interview last night on NY1, Scoppetta again blasted the unions, saying their actions have the "potential to be very dangerous."

In the letter, Scoppetta also claimed the unions were urging members to increase response times as part of their campaign to force the FDNY to increase the number of engines manned by five firefighters — most now have four—and to prevent further firehouse closings.

He said that the unions' steps came on the heels of the FDNY taking disciplinary action against a driver and a fire officer after a July 10, 2004, accident involving Engine 94, in which a civilian was killed when his car was hit by the truck, which had run a red light.

Cassidy scoffed at the accusation, saying, "The only thing we've tried to do is tell [firefighters] to drive safely."

A top FDNY official who requested anonymity said, "The worst offenders are going to have to answer to the chief. The guys in the field tend to do their job and do it well. We believe that they're getting bad advice from their union officials."

Additional reporting by Philip Messing

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