

UFA head: Scoppetta's criticism 'a desperate act'

BY WILLIAM MURPHY AND DAN JANISON
STAFF WRITERS

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Cameras should be installed on the dashes in every city fire truck as a safety measure, even if it slows response times, the head of the fire officers' union said Friday.

Peter Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, said attempts to blame a recent increase in response times on him was a desperate act by Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta.

Scoppetta's criticism "was an attempt to shift public attention away from the dangerous policies of the Bloomberg-Scoppetta administration -- a deliberate downsizing that has resulted in a smaller, cheaper and slower Fire Department," he said.

Gorman said Scoppetta's remarks Thursday about increased response times, which the commissioner blamed in part on a union recommendation that firefighters stop at red lights and stop signs before proceeding, failed to mention a 4 percent increase since September in fire activity and more units out of service for training.

The commissioner's remarks also downplayed the impact of eliminating six engine companies two years ago, Gorman said.

Gorman said the department should take credit for a reduction in vehicle accidents during the first three months of the year as the department stressed safety and firefighters and officers acted with more care.

Scoppetta issued a statement Friday in which he said Gorman's comments about stopping at red lights and stop signs had "coincided with a troubling rise in response times."

Scoppetta also said closing six engine companies had added .32 of a second to average response times, but he provided no data to bolster his contention that stopping at red lights had an impact.

Response times to structural fires slowed by an average of 18 seconds, to 4 minutes and 35 seconds in the past eight months, beginning in September.

The department brought administrative charges against a member of Gorman's union, an officer, for failing to properly supervise a firefighter who drove a fire truck through a red light on an emergency run in the Bronx in July, leading to an accident that left a civilian dead.

The department began a pilot program in March when it installed dash-mounted video cameras on four fire trucks. Gorman said he had urged long before last year's accident that fire trucks come to a full stop at red lights and stop signs before proceeding.

He said his recommendation was the same as that offered by the National Fire Protection Association.

His recommendation was also consistent with a 35-year-old department policy that Scoppetta changed after the accident to conform to state law, which allows emergency vehicles to proceed through warning signs without stopping, but with caution.

Scoppetta has said response times are better than the standards set by the National Fire Prevention Association, but then he disagrees with the group's standards on vehicle and traffic laws, the union president said.

"We need guidelines," Gorman said. "NFPA guidelines are proven. Scoppetta's guidelines are a committee of one."

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