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Burning mad at union

Irate commish sees intentional delays

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 and ALISON GENDAR
 DAILY NEWS POLICE BUREAU

Alarming times

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Clash adds more fuel to fire



Gordon NEWS

Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scopetta accused the city's top fire unions yesterday of jeopardizing the lives of New Yorkers by deliberately slowing the response times to emergencies.

The unprecedented charges came in a stunning letter that called the alleged misconduct "alarming" and "dangerous."

"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," Scopetta wrote.

"This is the very worst kind of union action imaginable," he added, according to a copy of the scathing letter obtained by the Daily News.

Scopetta blamed the slowdown on union leaders' telling chauffeurs - firefighters who drive the rigs - to stop at all red lights and stop signs while heading to calls.

FDNY regulations allow emergency vehicles to go through stop signs and lights after slowing down. The rules do not require rigs to stop.

Fire engine response times hit 4 minutes, 35 seconds during the period from January to April, up from 4 minutes, 17 seconds during the corresponding part in 2004.

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The average response time to medical emergencies also shot up - to 5 minutes, 1 second, compared with 4 minutes, 38 seconds during the same period last year.

"It is not an exaggeration that seconds save lives, and in some [neighborhoods] response times are a minute slower this year," a fire source said.

In his four-page letter to the Uniformed Fire Officers Association and Uniformed Firefighters Association, the commissioner accused union honchos of intentionally trying to increase response times as part of a scheme to force the FDNY to reopen shuttered engine companies and increase staffing.

"You have erroneously sought to explain to the media that increased response times are the result of the closing of six engine companies two years ago," Scoppetta fumed. "That is completely false."

UFA President Stephen Cassidy was quick to fire back.

Cassidy blamed City Hall for the higher response times, saying the decision to close six companies in 2003 and shutter other firehouses during certain tours was responsible. He added that Scoppetta has demanded firefighters drive more safely while heading to emergencies. "We've cut accidents by 50%," Cassidy said. "They can't have it both ways." Peter Gorman, president of the fire officers union, said he would never tell his members to slow down.

"It's ridiculous," Gorman said. "My guys are very dedicated, very professional."

But Scoppetta cited several occasions in the past six months when Gorman and Cassidy allegedly advised their members to "disregard department rules."

According to Scoppetta, Gorman told his members in a bulletin last November to "make a full stop before proceeding through a red light or stop sign while responding to fires and emergencies."

The result of such instructions was "an increase in response times well beyond those caused by our successful effort to reduce accidents," Scoppetta wrote.

The union directives allegedly followed the FDNY's decision to discipline a chauffeur after a fire rig that ran a red light killed a civilian in the Bronx last July.

Scoppetta wrote that he reviewed FDNY regulations after the accident and made changes to make it clear that the rules do not require emergency response vehicles to halt at red lights or stop signs.

FDNY officials said not all engine companies took part in the alleged slowdown. Of the city's 197 engine companies, 52 showed stable or improved response times for the first four months of the year, they said.

Alarming times

Here are Fire Department response times for each borough, comparing April 2004 with April 2005:

2004 2005

Manhattan 4:08 4:31

Bronx 4:10 4:41

Brooklyn 3:49 4:14

Queens 4:49 4:57

Staten Island 4:32 4:51

Excerpts from Scoppetta's angry letters

Excerpts from the scathing letter to union leaders from Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta:

'Average citywide response times have increased in each of the last eight months... a statistic that is both alarming and dangerous. I am concerned that you have been sending the wrong message to your members with respect to this issue, and in doing so are endangering public safety.'

'[Peter] Gorman [president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association] has repeatedly directed officers to disregard department rules and regulations.'

'Contrary to current department regulations, you continue to advise your members to stop at red lights, regardless of whether it is necessary or sensible to do so.'

'Your actions may well be endangering the public you are sworn to serve.'

'Disregarding all the facts, you have erroneously sought to explain to the media that increased response times are the result of the closing of six engine companies two years ago. That is completely false.'

Clash adds more fuel to fire

Firefighter union leaders have repeatedly knocked heads with Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta since Mayor Bloomberg appointed him in 2001.

Here are the chief disputes that have fueled the bad blood:

- The closing of six firehouses in May 2003 for budgetary reasons. Union leaders accused the commissioner of failing to support corporate sponsorships to prevent the closings.
- Scoppetta's decision last December to reduce from five to four the number of firefighters in 49 of the city's 197 engine companies. The commissioner said it was necessary due to sick leave abuses. Union honchos charged it was "politics" and endangered the lives of the firefighters and New Yorkers.
- A scathing no-confidence vote against Scoppetta by the Uniformed Firefighters Association last December.

- No new contract. Firefighters have been without a contract for three years.
- The creation of a zero-tolerance policy against the abuse of alcohol and use of illegal drugs after a string of embarrassing incidents involving firefighters last year.
- The disciplining of two firefighters on an FDNY rig that ran a red light in the Bronx and hit a car, killing a civilian driver last July.
- Mayor Bloomberg's decision last month to put the NYPD in charge of hazardous materials incidents, instead of the FDNY. Firefighters blamed Scoppetta for failing to stand up to the mayor and Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly.

Leo Standora

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