

## New York fire commissioner blames union leaders for slower response time because of red light policy

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NEW YORK -- The fire department commissioner said in a letter Thursday that firefighter response times have slowed because union leaders have advised members to stop before going through red lights or stop signs.

A union president called the commissioner's accusation "foolish."

In a letter to fire union presidents Peter Gorman and Stephen Cassidy, Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta said Gorman has "repeatedly directed officers to disregard department rules and regulations" by advising them to stop before running red lights or stop signs on the job.

The fire department's policy allows fire trucks responding to emergencies to go through red lights or stop signs "after slowing down as may be necessary for safe operation." It also states that the provision "shall not relieve the driver from the duty to drive with due regard for the safety of all persons, nor shall this protect the driver from the consequences of reckless disregard for the safety of others."

The department took disciplinary action against a firefighter and officer after their truck went through a red light and struck a civilian vehicle, killing a passenger, in July 2004.

After that accident, the department reviewed its policy \_ which had prohibited going through red lights but was routinely ignored \_ and changed it to conform to state law.

Scoppetta cited several examples in which Gorman allegedly told union members to stop before going through intersections.

Cassidy said they were telling members to drive safely and to read the policy.

"It's foolish for the fire commissioner to blame me and Pete Gorman for increasing response times when they've instituted a specific policy to reduce the number of accidents," Cassidy, president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association, said by telephone.

Cassidy said the department has focused on driving more safely, citing the use of driving simulators funded by a grant from NASCAR.

"Do they think they can reduce the number of accidents and ask firefighters to drive faster?" he said.

In Scoppetta's letter, provided to The Associated Press by the Uniformed Firefighters Association, the commissioner charged that the advice to stop at red lights "is being given, at least in part, to bolster certain aspects of the union's agenda, including efforts to increase five-firefighter staffing on engines and to prevent firehouse closings."

The majority of the city's engine companies have four firefighters, but some have five. The firefighters unions expressed disapproval in December because Scoppetta reduced the number of companies with five members from 60 to 11.

Scoppetta said the unions have sought to blame the increased response times on the closures of six engine companies two years ago.

He said that the average citywide response time has increased by 15 seconds in the past two years but that less than a third of a second of the increase could be attributed to the closures.

Cassidy dismissed the accusation that the unions were motivated by the firehouse closures.

"The fire commissioner is looking to blame someone other than himself," Cassidy said.

A message left for Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, on Thursday night was not immediately returned.

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