

## **Arbitration Proves Fire Department Is Understaffed**

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*Lt. Brian Boehm*

The recent Public Employees Relations Board decision concluded that the Jamestown Professional Firefighters Association local 1772 have been right all along in their argument with city officials that staffing levels are dangerously low.

After three years of negotiations with the city, the union filed for arbitration as a last resort. The union's testimony proved without a doubt the impact that the staff reductions have on the firefighters, which include increased workload, hazards, injuries and inherent dangers. Because of insufficient manpower, the citizens of Jamestown are not getting the fire protection they pay for and deserve. We have gone from 21 down to nine firefighters on a shift protecting the entire city. The number of calls has more than doubled in the same period to about 3,600 per year. This amounts to two engine companies and one ladder truck protecting almost 32,000 residents in 9.5 square miles. Add to this the fact that Jamestown has multiple resident high rises and apartment buildings, old factories, high levels of hazardous materials, and old balloon construction homes built close to each other, the dangers are obvious. A fire station is closed every day and night, which is like playing Russian roulette.

In Arbitrator Foster's ruling he says that "Having fewer fire companies necessarily increases the average time to respond to a fire, which in turn means that the average fire that the firefighters must battle will be larger and the structures that are on fire more unstable. Having fewer firefighters to attack a fire means that the tasks that have to be done when the crews arrive at the scene will take longer as they are spread more thinly, and it also means that there is less capacity for the firefighters to protect each other. Fewer firefighters to perform the same necessary tasks also suggests more stress and more fatigue, which seem intuitively to heighten the risk of injury. The reductions in staffing have been substantial. It is also clear, we believe, that the job of firefighting has been made riskier, in that the staffing has been reduced not only to levels far below the historical norms in Jamestown, but also below levels found in cities of comparable size and below the minimum levels cited in the studies and reports discussed above. It is clear that in effecting the reductions, and especially the most recent ones in 2002, the City has made a choice to buy less fire protection, a choice that was theirs to make." They may decide that they are willing to have less fire protection but they may not decide to increase the risks and burdens placed on the firefighters providing the protection without bargaining over appropriate compensation or some other quid pro quo.

Included in Foster's award he made it less expensive for the city to pay newly hired firefighters until their eighth year. He also allowed a flexible work schedule for the least four senior firefighters hired after Jan. 1, 2001, that may be used to provide manning levels before the use of overtime. These incentives could save the city thousands of dollars per year.

Thirteen firefighters plus a shift commander is what the union has been asking for. This is a number that is still below acceptable standards. Foster, however in his award is requiring the city to establish a fund to compensate the firefighters for the added risk of working on shifts that are staffed with fewer than 12 firefighters plus the shift commander. The Jamestown firefighters do not want one penny put into this fund. This is about safety, clear and simple. Firefighters, like everyone else want to go home after the shift.

The firefighters union has spent tens of thousands of dollars proving its case. The city most likely has spent the same. It is time the city leaders stop wasting taxpayer's money and uses it more wisely to improve public safety. We hope that the city leaders will finally realize

that what the union has been telling them all along is right for Jamestown and that more firefighters will be hired, just as the arbitrator recommended. Don't wait until it's too late. Please give us sufficient staffing to effectively protect the citizens of Jamestown now.

*Lt Brian Boehm is Secretary of the Jamestown, NY Professional Firefighters Association Local 1772.*