

**TO:** Mayor Hoy and City Councilors

**THROUGH:** Keith Stahley, City Manager

**FROM:** Mike Niblock, Fire Chief

**DATE:** October 25, 2023

**SUBJECT:** Fire Department Vacancies and Staffing

In response to questions and discussion during the September 18, 2023, *City Council Work Session, Revised FY 2024 Budget*, I am providing an overview of fire department vacancies and staffing.

### **VACANCY RATE**

Unfilled positions are a routine aspect of the operation of larger municipal fire departments. With the FY 24 Budget authorizing 165 firefighters in all ranks up to Battalion Chief, we expect to experience periodic vacancies resulting from unforeseen departures and retirements. The vacancies tend to vary due to the ongoing cycle of personnel separations and hiring of new recruits.

A "tolerable" vacancy rate, often considered to be 5% or less, amounts to eight or fewer unfilled positions. Currently, we are contending with a 9% vacancy rate. This increased rate is a temporary situation primarily resulting from the impact of COVID-19, retirements, and promotions within our ranks. It's noteworthy that other fire departments along the West Coast are also grappling with a surge in vacancy rates.

Outside of our current vacancies, only three have remained vacant for more than six months, corresponding to a 1.96% overall vacancy rate older than six months. Nonetheless, we've taken proactive measures to bolster our recruitment and recently conducted a hiring process. As a result, we are ready to fill these open positions but are still holding off due to the possibility of losing positions with the revised *FY 2024 Budget*.

### **HIRING PROCESS**

To actively hire, there must be available vacancies. The hiring procedure for a firefighter/paramedic encompasses a 3-4 month timeframe involving multiple interviews and scenario-based testing, background investigations, and mandatory assessments. As with the police department, a position must be open when a job offer is extended. Reducing the number of vacant positions or implementing "hiring freezes" within the fire department can have several significant effects on hiring and the department as a whole:

1. **Disruption of the Hiring Process:** Hiring freezes or reducing vacant positions disrupt the recruitment and hiring process, making it challenging to fill crucial roles promptly.

2. **Decreased Efficiency:** This disruption impedes the department's efficiency by delaying training new personnel, impacting response times, and increasing the workload on existing staff.
3. **Additional Vacancies:** Any interruption in the hiring process can lead to more vacancies due to natural attrition, as existing staff may retire, resign, or transfer to other departments during this uncertain time.
4. **Recruitment Challenges:** A hiring freeze or reducing vacant positions may also make it more challenging to attract and retain quality candidates in the long term, as potential candidates may seek employment opportunities elsewhere.

### **ELIMINATING VACANT POSITIONS**

Reducing vacancies or imposing hiring freezes can create a domino effect, affecting the department's overall functionality, response capabilities, and long-term recruitment efforts. Removing fire department positions, whether they are currently occupied or vacant, will have the following consequences:

1. **Increased Workload:** Existing personnel will shoulder the responsibilities of the removed positions, leading to a heavier workload. This will result in fatigue, burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and the possibility of personnel resigning and taking jobs with other departments that offer a reduced workload and better work/life balance.
2. **Safety Concerns:** Overworked personnel may face safety risks due to fatigue, which can be especially problematic in high-stress emergencies where quick and accurate decision-making is essential.
3. **Operational Challenges:** With a reduced workforce, the department may need help to provide certain services, maintain equipment, and meet training requirements, impacting its overall operational effectiveness.
4. **Community Impact:** A reduced workforce can affect the department's ability to engage with the community, conduct public education and prevention programs, and collaborate with local organizations.
5. **Increased Overtime:** Existing staff will be required to work overtime to compensate for the loss of positions, which can further strain personnel and the department's budget.

### **MANAGING THE WORKLOAD**

Considering a vacancy rate higher than average, the current workload is managed through temporary measures, which involve increasing mandated overtime and having individuals work extended shifts beyond 24 hours, including shifts lasting 48, 72, or even 96 hours. Additionally, given the sustained increase in call volume each year, assessing and streamlining the workload and the types of calls we respond to is essential. This evaluation may involve eliminating specific response categories to ensure our personnel's workload remains acceptable and safe.

### **MINIMUM STAFFING LEVELS**

Minimum staffing within Salem Fire Department pertains to the minimal number of firefighters/paramedics required to respond effectively to emergencies and maintain a safe

operational environment. Upholding these minimum staffing levels is imperative for public safety and the efficient operation of the fire department:

1. **Minimum Staffing:** Minimum staffing levels have been established by considering various factors, including the size and demands of the community being served, the nature of incidents to which the department must respond, and adherence to safety regulations and guidelines.
2. **Continuous Availability:** The Salem Fire Department must ensure a constant presence of sufficient personnel around the clock to respond promptly and effectively to emergencies, including fires, medical crises, rescues, hazardous materials incidents, and other critical situations. Our current deployment is 11 engines, 2 ladder trucks, and 2 battalion vehicles, requiring 43 personnel on shift daily for a 24-hour response.
3. **Ensuring Timely Response and Safety:** Maintaining minimum staffing levels is critical to guarantee immediate emergency responses and support readily available during high-stress situations. This contributes to reduced response times and, most importantly, enhances the safety of both the public and personnel.