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County's OT shocker

Time and a half far cheaper than paying out benefits to new firefighters

By Troy Anderson
Staff Writer

Benefits for Los Angeles County firefighters have become so expensive – equaling 59 percent of their base salaries – that officials say it's now cheaper to pay massive amounts of overtime than hire more firefighters.

As state and county officials have sweetened benefit and pension packages for firefighters and workers' compensation and health costs have risen, the cost of county firefighter benefits has risen from 42 percent in 1996 to 58.6 percent. That compares with 39 percent for county administrative employees and 49 percent for Sheriff's Department workers.

Private sector employee benefits are equal to a third of salaries or less in many cases.

"As ridiculous as it sounds, it's more cost-effective to bring in a firefighter from home and pay them time and a half because we don't have to pay more benefits for them," Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman said.

"If we have to hire another firefighter, we'll have to pay 59 percent of his salary for his health care, pension and other benefits. So to hire more firefighters to cover (for employees who are sick or on vacation) on a day -to-day basis is 9 percent more expensive than paying them time and a half."

Information obtained under the state Public Records Act shows that in 2002-03, more than 940 county firefighters boosted their salaries by more than 50 percent with overtime, and 15 more than doubled their salaries, including one who took home \$217,036.

The analysis of salary and overtime data for 2,209 county firefighters earning more than \$80,000 a year also found that nearly all of the them – 2,116 – earned at least \$10,000 in overtime.

The highest-paid county Fire Department employee was a captain who took home \$217,036. He was able to more than double his \$94,447 salary with \$122,559 in overtime.

The number of firefighters boosting their paychecks with large amounts of overtime is greater than the total of three other county departments recently examined.

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Info



Within the county probation, health and sheriff's departments, 1,395 employees earned more than \$10,000 apiece in overtime, 390 boosted their salaries more than 50 percent through overtime and eight employees more than doubled their pay with overtime.

"Cities and counties bend over backwards to give public safety employees everything they want in terms of salaries and benefits," California Taxpayers' Association spokesman Ron Roach said. "And they are basically breaking the bank."

As a result, local and state governments are having to cut funding for many vital programs and government officials are pushing for higher taxes, Roach said. Los Angeles County officials are considering placing a one-half percent sales tax measure on the November ballot to boost criminal justice system funding.

The primary factor behind exploding firefighter overtime is "constant staffing," a contract provision that requires fire stations to be staffed around the clock for fires, medical calls or other emergencies. This means firefighters have to work overtime when co-workers are sick, injured, on vacation or on other types of leave.

In the county, this accounted for 73 percent of the \$91 million the Fire Department spent on overtime in 2002-03. Major fires and other large emergencies accounted for just 17 percent of the costs. And 5 percent was generated as a result of an automatic 10 hours of overtime firefighters are paid in every 28-day work cycle, as required under the Fair Labor Standards Act.

"Generally speaking, the way contracts are negotiated – you have requirements for so many firefighters on a truck and so many to go into a burning building – that they tend to have a system that is set up to rain overtime on all these people," Roach said. "If there is a disaster or emergency, you have to cover it. Los Angeles County is not alone.

Similar problems exist in the Los Angeles Fire Department, where employees earned \$222,975 through base and overtime pay.

The city Fire Department expects to spend \$84 million on overtime in 2003-04. Last fiscal year, seven firefighters racked up \$100,000 or more in overtime and 223 others earned \$50,000 or more working extra shifts.

In comparison, the county Fire Department expects to spend \$106 million on overtime in 2003-04, the most of the county's 36 departments. Last fiscal year, two county firefighters earned more than \$100,000 in overtime and 465 earned \$50,000 or more.

Officials say the rising costs of retirement, workers' compensation, health benefits, unemployment insurance and other benefits are behind much of the overtime for government employees.

"One of the factors is workers' compensation costs," Freeman said. "The costs of workers' compensation are out of control."

In comparison to the 59 percent benefit cost in the Fire Department, benefits for employees in the county's Chief Administrative Office cost 39 percent of their salaries. In the Sheriff's Department, benefits are 49 percent.

In the last few years, county audits have singled out the sheriff's and fire departments for skyrocketing pension costs. One audit found that sheriff's employees and firefighters apply for lucrative service-connected disability pensions at a rate 2 times higher than elsewhere in the state.

An earlier audit found the county retirement board granted disability pensions to 54 percent of its members, a rate substantially higher than in seven other large counties studied. In 1997-98, 75 percent of county firefighters took disability retirements. The rate averaged 64 percent in the three years prior to 2000.

In a work-connected disability retirement, public safety employees can get a pension worth up to 100 percent of their final compensation, with half of it tax-free. As a result of stock market losses in recent years and rising pensions, the taxpayer contributions the county makes to its pension fund have soared, rising from \$1 billion in 2002-03 to an expected \$1.34 billion this fiscal year.

Bill McCammon, president of the California Fire Chiefs Association, said the problem is not limited to Los Angeles County.

"In some departments in the state, the benefits cost goes up to 70 percent," McCammon said. "So there is a benefit to using overtime to maintain minimum staffing levels.

"When the public hears about firefighters working considerable amounts of overtime, they come to the conclusion that there is a scam going on. We have not found that to be the

case. We have found that these individuals choose to work the overtime."

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