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SATURDAY

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Action taken, fallout is felt

Harassment in city fire station leads to changes, but morale is said to be suffering.

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Almost a year has passed since the first harassment was reported at the Sacramento Fire Department's Station 6.

Since then, several other incidents occurred in the Oak Park station. Many were directed at a female firefighter, who found a four-letter sexual slur written on her ax handle.

City officials say that the first phase of the investigation has been completed and disciplinary actions have been taken.

Officials of Sacramento Area Fire Fighters Local 522, however, deny that anyone has been disciplined as a direct result of the harassment incidents and that the investigation is no closer to finding those responsible.

City and union officials agree the investigation has not been handled in a timely manner because the Fire Department didn't have any process in place to handle such a complex internal investigation.

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Probe: A new internal investigation unit is created by the city

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Fire officials "tried to deal with the matter as best they could, but in reality they weren't equipped," said Deputy City Manager Richard Ramirez. "They took way too long and needed to throw other resources into it."

Ramirez said the Fire Department, which doesn't have an internal affairs unit, is used to dealing with routine personnel issues - not problems of this magnitude.

The City Manager's Office has created an investigative unit within its labor relations department to handle internal investigations for all city departments.

"We have learned from this inquiry that we need to set up this unit," Ramirez said.

The new investigative unit, which will be activated this month, will come late to the Station 6 inquiry, which has stretched for months.

"It's tearing these people apart," said Brian Rice, president of Local 522. "Many of them feel like, 'My career's shut down; it's over.' That's across the board, whether the person is a victim or

has been under investigation." Seven firefighters from the station have been transferred, including the female firefighter, who was the target of many of the incidents.

Firefighters have said the transfers spread unrest to other stations and the morale of the department is declining.

"Morale in the Sacramento Fire Department is at an all-time low," Rice said.

The incidents began almost a year ago, when a female firefighter on the C shift at Station 6 found orange paint in the pocket of her fire coat.

Orange is the color code of Station 6, and firefighters there have referred to themselves as "the orangemen."

"I went out there and told them emphatically that we need to make sure they are aware that we aren't going to tolerate any behavior like this," said former Sacramento City Deputy Chief Chuck Bader, who retired in November.

Fire stations become like second homes for firefighters who live together for 24-hour shifts, 10 days a month. They eat their meals together and sleep in the same room.

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Brian Rice
president of Sacramento Area Fire Fighters Local 522

In that atmosphere pranks aren't unusual, firefighters said.

Bader, however, said fire officials took the orange paint incident seriously but didn't realize it was only the first in a series of incidents.

"Within a number of weeks, the ax thing happened, and then tempers started flaring, and other things started happening," Bader said. "We were never able to interject or intercede quickly enough. We were not trained to deal with it."

Fire Chief Dennis Smith said the department told officials in the administration in June about the incidents. The City Attorney's Office then brought in the Police Department to help with the investigation.

"We notified all the proper people fairly early on, because it had the potential to be a sexual harassment case. That's not something you sweep under the rug," Smith said.

By then, it was too late, Bader said. There were problems recovering evidence from past incidents and sequestering people for interviews. Rumors started flying and fingers were pointed

at certain individuals, he said.

"What went wrong was that we never saw the end - what it was going to lead to - and never changed the way we were dealing with the situation," Bader said.

Although the investigation hasn't concluded, city officials said they have sent Local 522 a letter about the possibility of disciplining a firefighter from Station 6.

The president of Local 522 denies the firefighter is being disciplined in regard to the harassment incidents.

"The discipline that is proposed does stem out of behavior at Station 6 - but it is not part of the primary investigation," Rice said.

City officials said they don't know when the investigation will end.

"All of these people have good reputations as good solid firefighters and employees of the city," Rice said. "Now, they are collectively left feeling disenchanted and guilty."

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