

City moves to diversify fire corps

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City Councilwoman Lauren Hammond loves watching the charge kids get out of climbing aboard a fire truck with a big ladder or the wide-eyed adoration they give firefighters.

In demonstrations for young schoolchildren, firefighters can plant a powerful seed and start them dreaming about a career in public safety, Hammond said.

But somehow, those childhood dreams aren't coming to fruition for many minorities and women in Sacramento. City officials acknowledge that they face a problem with diversity in the ranks of firefighters, a force staffed mostly with white men, many of them "legacies" whose relatives are or were firefighters.

"The Fire Department is not reflective of this city's diversity," Hammond said. "We need to be much more aggressive and keep those kids interested in becoming firefighters."

The makeup of the city fire and police departments has been a concern for several years, officials said. So council members last week said they were encouraged when the Fire Department outlined a proposal to improve outreach efforts.

"After six years of talking about it, it's good to see some things being done," Hammond said.

On Thursday, the council unanimously approved a three-year recruitment program allocating \$430,000 next fiscal year and \$405,000 for each of the following two. Part of the money will be used to pay the salary of a department captain who oversees community outreach and recruitment.

"For some reason, it's been difficult for us to attract a diverse set of candidates into the Fire Department, so the council was encouraged to see this plan," Mayor Heather Fargo said. "It's an effort we hope will open the doors to a great employment opportunity."

City officials say the urgency has been heightened by recent accounts of problems in the Fire Department, including a claim filed by a female firefighter alleging she was sexually harassed by male co-workers.

Although Fire Chief Dennis Smith said his department's No. 1 policy issue is mirroring the city's multiethnic population - Time Magazine last year dubbed Sacramento the nation's most diverse city - statistics show it has fallen short.

While Latinos make up nearly 22 percent of Sacramento's population, they constitute 12 percent of city firefighters. African Americans are 15 percent of the city population, but less than 8 percent of the Fire Department. Asian Americans total more than 16 percent of the city, but are 5 percent of the force.

And although more than half of Sacramentans are women, less than 12 percent of city firefighters are female.

The city's most recent hiring statistics don't show significant progress in recruiting a more-diverse force. Over the past four years, the department has hired 137 prospective firefighters and paid them while they attended academy training. Of those recruits, now full-fledged firefighters, 107 were white and all but four were men, said Terrence Woods, director of human resources for the department.

"We need to do better," said Rod Chong, deputy fire chief. "If we are the most diverse city in the country, then there's a population here we should be able to pull in."

Chong and other fire officials say diversity on the force enhances cultural awareness in the department, creates smoother relationships with the community and makes for good role models.

But recruiting nontraditional candidates often means overcoming myriad obstacles. The University of California, for instance, has had only modest success in raising the number of underrepresented students at its most prestigious universities despite millions of dollars spent on outreach programs.

Last year, Sacramento allocated funds to help reach a broader pool of police applicants. Interim Police Chief Albert Najera said the department is making headway, but it has been "very, very difficult."

"We literally have to go out and recruit people face-to-face," Najera said.

Many agree that one of the most successful approaches is starting with young children.

Another is reaching out to adults through college job fairs, church events, and cultural and civic organizations.

Since the first of the year, the Fire Department has reassigned Capt. Joe Jackson as a full-time community outreach coordinator. The department also contracts with Kristene Smith Public Relations, paying \$1,600 a month for duties that include identifying and promoting career fairs. The new recruitment money approved Thursday will be used to pay Jackson and a new assistant.

The department also is working to create another Emergency Medical Technician/paramedic program in the city. Gaining an EMT certificate is the first educational requirement toward becoming a firefighter.

EMT classes are offered at American River and Cosumnes River community colleges, as well as through some private programs. However, officials believe another program located in the central city, where the population is most diverse and public transportation more available, is needed.

Even if the department is successful in attracting new people into an EMT program, it's unclear whether that would result in a more-diverse department.

Grant Goold, chairman of American River College's paramedic department, said that while the pool of students who enroll in its EMT courses is diverse, many of the minority and female students don't complete the training. He said the course overall suffers a 50 percent dropout rate.

Students could face more obstacles once they're at the academy or a station, said Wendy York, the attorney handling the sexual harassment case on behalf of the female firefighter. She said she believes Sacramento's Fire Department has a systemic intolerance for minorities and women.

But Smith, the fire chief, vehemently defends his department, saying it is committed to change.

"I don't think there is a climate of intolerance," Smith said. "The problem of diversity is not a new issue for us, or for other departments across the country. Certain groups of people are just not in the loop."