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LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Home

News

Local governments

Long Beach police, fire dispatchers work too much OT at high cost to the city, audit finds



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0 COMMENTS

Police and fire dispatch workers racked up an inordinate amount of overtime last year, which cost the city \$1.3 million in salaries and could potentially lead to burnout, a recent [audit](#) of the departments found.

Last year overtime hours accounted for 22 percent of all dispatcher work hours, the equivalent of 18 full-time positions, city Auditor Laura Doud found in an audit of the police and fire emergency communications centers from 2010 to 2014.

“It is a warning,” Doud said in an interview. “There are risks there. We think the hiring efforts could be a little more strategically directed.”

The departments need to increase staffing and revamp their recruiting process, which thus far has been an infrequent process that has produced few qualified candidates, the report found.

Turnover is a big problem. Just 40 percent of those hired made it through their one-year probationary period, the audit found.

The job requires long shifts and stressful work. Police dispatchers work 10-hour shifts, while fire dispatchers, housed in the same building, work 12-hour shifts. The centers process an average of 700,000 calls per year.

The fire dispatch center in particular is understaffed, according to the audit. The department is only budgeted for 19 full-time positions, but needs closer to 25 positions.

“While overtime can be used to cover a portion of full-time position requirements, using overtime to cover five-six positions, or 20-25 [percent] of your scheduling needs is risky and creates a work environment where working very long hours is the norm,” the report found.

Doud said police and fire department management agreed with the recommendations and have already taken steps to boost recruitment and lower overtime.

Reggie Harrison, director of disaster preparedness and emergency communications for the city, said the audit has validated the initiatives his office has taken since it was established in 2013.

During the first four months of 2015, the city’s fire and police communications centers saw a 35 percent drop in overtime compared to January-April 2014, Harrison said. That translates into a \$350,000 reduction in overtime paid.

“The key is to fill the vacancies,” he said. “We’re contracting with a national testing network. [Dispatch center] applicants can take these tests and results become available to us and other cities. That allows for a continuous and predictable [hiring and training] schedule.”

There currently are 15 public safety dispatchers in various stages of training, Harrison said. They will complete training around October and November this year.

The city is also working to recruit emergency dispatchers currently working for other cities, and hiring retired dispatcher on a part-time basis, Harrison said. This will allow them to begin work sooner than a candidate who is not yet working as a dispatcher.

“Dispatchers are highly-trained, highly-skilled positions,” he said. “It requires a highly-developed multitasking skills ... You’re listening to this person describing, in most cases, what is the worst day of their lives.”


While the audit warns against the potential for overwork to lead to problems, it also praises the work done by the city’s dispatch personnel.

“It’s a highly-trained, high-pressure position,” Doud said. “They’re handling multiple tasks at one time. We really appreciate the work that they’re doing.”

The two emergency communications centers answered emergency calls well within industry standards, according to the audit. In 2013 police dispatchers answered nearly 95-percent of all emergency calls within 10 seconds, surpassing the established performance standard. Fire dispatchers answered 97-percent of all emergency calls within 15 seconds.

Harrison said the city will continue to improve its emergency dispatch centers, particularly to boost the 40 percent retention rate of recruits.

“We’re not satisfied with that’s where Long Beach should be,” he said.

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