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Police, fire departments see shortages across USA



Mon Nov 29, 6:31 AM ET

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By Mimi Hall, USA TODAY

Mayor Jane Campbell calls police and firefighters part of the nation's "domestic army" - the troops who will be called upon to respond to the next terrorist attack. But in Cleveland and many other financially troubled cities, the ranks of those first responders are thinning.



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Cities see firefighter shortage

At least two-thirds of the nation's fire departments are understaffed, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), which sets firefighting codes and standards. The shortage is worst in rural volunteer departments that have trouble recruiting new members. But many big and medium-size cities that are more likely to be terrorist targets are also short-handed.

Some, including New York, have had to close fire stations; others, such as Houston, have had temporary closures. In many cities, response times are slower, and trucks go out with too few firefighters.

That can have a real impact. Investigators cited many factors that contributed to the deaths of 100 people in a West Warwick, R.I., nightclub fire last year. But a report commissioned by the state noted that the five firetrucks at the scene arrived with only two firefighters each - half the number recommended by the NFPA - and video showed delays in getting hoses turned on.

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"While staffing companies to nationally recognized standards is desirable," the report said, "it is beyond the reach of many financially strapped communities."

Many big-city police departments such as Cleveland also are bleeding officers. Nationally, the number of police has remained stagnant in recent years, despite

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federal help from the Clinton-era COPS community-policing program, which spent \$9 billion to help put 118,000 more officers on the streets. The Bush administration, which has emphasized training and says staffing levels should be largely a local responsibility, is phasing out the program.

Staffing problems are being felt coast to coast. New York City, with 23,000 police officers, has lost 1,000 a year for the past three years. Minneapolis cut 38 positions from its police force last year. The Oregon State Police laid off 129 troopers from its 600-member force. "It's almost completely budget-driven," says Gene Voegtlin of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

There also are staffing problems at 911 emergency centers. National figures are not available for 911 call-takers and dispatchers, sometimes called the first of the first responders.

But Steve Souder, director of the Montgomery County, Md., 911 Emergency Communications Center, says staff shortages are at a crisis point nationwide. In his county, 25% of 911 jobs turn over each year as employees burn out from the stress and hectic schedule and take better-paying jobs with private companies.

In many cities, police and fire chiefs say, layoffs and attrition are leading to dangerously low staffing levels that could leave emergency workers unprepared and citizens unprotected during future terrorist attacks. The call-up of reservists and National Guard members for the wars in Iraq ([news - web sites](#)) and Afghanistan ([news - web sites](#)) also is taxing police and fire departments. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the National Guard has called up 4,153 police officers and 451 firefighters.

After the 2001 attacks, "politicians wanted nothing but to stand by us and tell us what heroes we were and talk about all they were going to do for us," says Bob Fisher, president of the firefighters union in Cleveland. But with 7% of the city's firefighters laid off this year and little time for training, he says, "the capabilities of this department have been reduced since 9/11."

**Smaller staffs, higher standards**

Emergency preparedness officials are most concerned about the shortage of firefighters, who would be the first to respond to a catastrophic attack. In the past 20 years, the number of firefighters nationwide has declined, despite a 25% increase in the nation's population.

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The fire protection association estimates that to combat terrorism, the nation needs 75,000 to 85,000 new paid firefighters in its cities. In the last major assessment of the nation's fire service in 2002, the association and the Federal Emergency Management Agency ([news - web sites](#)) found that only 13% of departments were trained and equipped to handle a chemical or biological incident with at least 10 people injured. Only 11% could handle the collapse of a building with 50 or more occupants.

"If you can't even tackle a structural fire, how are you going to handle a mass-casualty event?" asks Tim Raducha-Grace of New York University's Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response.

Kansas City Fire Chief Richard "Smokey" Dyer, past president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, says his city is the only one in the country where voters approved a sales tax to pump money into the fire department. Despite the approval of that 2001 ballot measure, ongoing staffing problems mean that a third of his city's firetrucks are still sent out with fewer than four firefighters - an NFPA safety standard that allows for two firefighters to enter a burning building while two remain outside to handle equipment and, if necessary, rescue their colleagues.

Thanks to the local tax increase, Dyer is slowly building up his staff. But elsewhere, he says, staffing shortages are getting worse - and at a terrible time. "As the threat has risen for our cities, and as additional tasks have been assigned to our fire departments, the resources for the fire service have gone down," he says. "Most big-city fire departments are in the process of reducing staffing."

Here in Cleveland, Fire Station 13 no longer has a hook-and-ladder truck. There aren't enough firefighters to keep up safety inspections they used to do at local metal-plating plants and chemical companies that store thousands of gallons of deadly toxins. They can't spare the people to take time out for special weapons-of-mass-destruction training offered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

The city's fire training academy, with its three-story practice tower, is like a "ghost town" now, says Dean Murad, a member of the station's rescue squad. At least half the classes have been cut, he says, and instead of regularly scheduled training sessions for firefighters, training is now "haphazard."

After 70 layoffs since January, the city's fire department would struggle "to do what they're counting on us to do" if a terrorist attack or other disaster caused mass casualties, Fire Chief Paul Stubbs says. Even if there were a few house fires at once, "I don't know if this city could handle it," says Station 13 firefighter Roy Bruder, a 23-year veteran.

The situation at the police department, where 250 officers were laid off this year, is no better. Special units for the harbor, street crimes, auto thefts, narcotics, youth gangs and community policing are among those eliminated since January as part of an effort to close the city's \$60 million budget deficit.

Among the pieces of equipment now lying idle are two \$1.1 million helicopters, bought with grant money from Washington for an eight-person police aviation unit that's now defunct. The helicopters were used to patrol the city for security breaches along the waterfront and at power plants and high-rises whenever the nation's terror alert level was raised.

To keep enough patrolmen on the streets, Police Chief Edward Lohn says he had to cut the department's more specialized units.

The result, police spokesman Wayne Drummond says, "is that we're more of a reactive department now than a pro-active department."

When he eliminated 15% of the department's 1,826 officers, Lohn says, he also had to recall 10 of the 15 officers he had assigned to work with the FBI ([news - web sites](#)) on area terrorism task forces. "I feel bad when I get a call from the agent in charge at the FBI," Lohn says, because he can no longer offer to help. The cuts "have been very painful."

#### Problems nationwide

Staffing problems are showing up across the nation:

- Three years ago, the Springfield, Mass., fire department had 395 members, 10 open fire stations, 76 firefighters on duty at any given time and four firefighters per truck. By this summer, the department had 256 members, seven open fire stations, 39 firefighters on duty at a time and only three firefighters per truck - the result of budget cuts. Local union chief David Wells says the city is engaged in "Russian roulette" when it comes to the safety of its citizens.
- In Richmond, Calif., which has an oil refinery and a deep-water port, the city has laid off 18 firefighters since January, bringing the department down to 60. Ten years ago, it had 110. To compensate, the department occasionally closes stations and runs trucks with fewer than four firefighters on board. "It's a dangerous situation," says Lou Paulson, president of California Professional Firefighters.
- In Ohio, there are roughly the same number of state troopers today - 1,500 - as there were in the mid-1970s, "even though we have 20 times the amount of work," says Jim Roberts, director of the Ohio State Troopers Association. He said post-9/11 demands have driven up overtime costs and overtaxed troopers.
- In Seattle, firefighters are protesting a decision by the mayor to address a shortage of 911 dispatchers by reassigning firefighters to that job. The move means the number of firefighters at one of the city's stations will be cut to three per firetruck. In a letter to members last month, union president Paul Atwater said the move creates "unsafe working conditions."
- In Boston, the number of police officers has dropped from 1,800 in the late 1990s to fewer than 1,400 today. "It's been a gradual deterioration of the force," says Michael O'Hara of the International

Union of Police Associations. He says the department is also strained by the need for officers to go through more extensive training for biological and chemical attacks and by military operations abroad. About 40 officers now serve in Iraq and Afghanistan.

SAFER Act money is a start

Officially acknowledging the problem for the first time this year, Congress approved \$65 million for a new federal program to help cities pay for more firefighters.

The SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) Act was authorized at \$7.6 billion over seven years in November 2003. But President Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) didn't request any money for the program in his 2005 budget, and it was finally approved by Congress with less than 1% of the authorized amount.

Bush administration officials say the federal government shouldn't be in the business of paying salaries for state and local employees.

"We believe that every mayor and governor has a responsibility to ensure that there are adequate public safety professionals in their states and communities," says Marc Short of the Homeland Security Department. "It is our job to make sure that they're best trained and equipped to prevent terrorism and respond if need be."

Firefighters say the money is a start, even though it is likely to pay for only a few hundred firefighters nationwide this year. That's a far cry from the 100,000 that Democrat John Kerry ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) said he would add to the ranks if elected president.

Jim Shannon, president of the National Fire Protection Association, says the shortfall in personnel and resources "troubles me a lot."

But Frank Cilluffo, a former top homeland security adviser to Bush, says fire and police departments don't need more bodies, just better training and equipment.

"Let's not create armies of homeland defense warriors, but rather build on existing capabilities and leverage those," says Cilluffo, now director of George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute. "The key is to be heavy on training and exercises."

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