

Fire department overtime out of control, city official warns

By Brian Meyer - News Staff Reporter

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Overtime in the Buffalo Fire Department is out of control, the city's finance chief warned today.

If costs aren't brought in line, Finance Commissioner Janet Penksa said it will be impossible to negotiate a new contract with firefighters.

Fire overtime in the first pay period of the new fiscal year hit its highest level since Byron W. Brown became mayor in early 2006. Firefighters received \$512,283 in overtime during the first half of July, when they worked 11,839 hours.

"You're basically spending at a rate of over \$1 million a month," Penksa told fire officials.

Penksa and other city leaders have voiced suspicions that morale problems caused by a five-year contract stalemate have driven up sick time. The city must comply with minimum manpower levels, so overtime costs increase when more firefighters call in sick.

Overtime in the first pay period was 88 percent over budget, and 18 percent higher than it was during the same period a year ago.

"I think you can tell from my tone I'm worried," Penksa told fire officials.

"We're concerned as well ... not just you," retorted Deputy Fire Commissioner Patrick T. Lewis.

Nine firefighters remain out on injuries following a June fire in a Niagara Street warehouse, said Lewis, contributing to the higher overtime.

Penksa said every time the administration raises concerns about overtime, fire officials provide "good reasons." But she said solutions must be found, or the city could be forced to make cuts in other departments to keep its budget in balance.

"I'm asking you to creatively think here," Penksa told Lewis at a meeting of CitiStat, Buffalo's accountability panel.

For example, Penksa wondered aloud if some higher-ranking fire officials could be demoted, thereby allowing them to get back on fire trucks and fulfill minimum manpower needs. Lewis dismissed this option.

"You need supervision for safety," he said.

The city has recruited a new class of firefighters, but they won't likely be ready for the streets for at least a year.

Unless overtime costs are reduced, Penksa said, there's no way the city could demonstrate to its control board a new contract with firefighters would be affordable.

"We can't afford a [new] contract and this overtime," Penksa said. "We just can't do it."

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