

Report: Fire sick days pad Yonkers OT

By Ernie Garcia • elgarcia@lohud.com • The Journal News • November 17, 2010

YONKERS — Minimal oversight of firefighters' unlimited sick leave results in a yearly average of 9.6 sick days per firefighter and excessive overtime, according to a new report.

Yonkers Inspector General Dan Schorr concluded that annual non-work-related sick leave "has dramatically increased in the past decade" and that the city's financial incentives to prevent excessive sick leave have failed to discourage wide-spread use of sick leave.

Schorr released his findings on Tuesday.

His report notes that some seemingly sickly firefighters had healthy overtime earnings. In one case, a firefighter with 24 total sick tours plus 10 work-related absences in 2009 was nonetheless able to work 21 overtime tours and earn an additional \$17,000 in overtime that year.

Schorr also wrote that some firefighters are manipulating their schedules. He found that one firefighter did not work from Oct. 15 through Dec. 31 last year by using 19 vacation days, five sick tours and 10 swaps.

"These profiles paint a picture of scheduling that is far too easy to manipulate for individual firefighter advantage and costs the city significant amounts of overtime," Schorr wrote.

Schorr urged city officials to create new procedures for monitoring sick leave and to restructure the annual financial incentive offered to firefighters who don't use sick leave. Mayor Phil Amicone responded to Schorr's report by using harsh words like "scam" to describe the practices it details.

"I'm furious," Amicone said on Tuesday. "If we can prove they're intentionally taking sick time off when they're not sick, that means you're stealing money from the city."

Amicone said the city will go after sick-time abusers and he will ask the firefighters' union to do its part. Amicone cannot unilaterally change sick leave rules because they are part of a union contract that, while expired, is still in effect until a new one is negotiated.

"I'm hoping the firefighters who are not abusing sick leave, the laid-off firefighters, the demoted fire officers, will pressure their union leaders to sit at the table and figure out how to solve this growing problem," Amicone said.

Barry B. McGoey, president of the Yonkers firefighters' union, said he agreed with some of Schorr's recommendations, but called the report biased against the union's 350 members because no other department's sick leave use was analyzed.

McGoey said the union has unsuccessfully sought access to sick leave records for years to monitor overuse.

“The level of sick use has been relatively constant over the past few years,” said McGoey, adding that the fire department doesn’t have a full-time physician like the police who can check up on allegedly sick workers.

The release of the report comes one day after Amicone blasted a draft of a state comptroller’s office audit of police overtime, calling it biased. The mayor said he had asked Schorr to look at the firefighters’ sick leave because the state comptroller had not undertaken an examination of the fire department.