

Chicago Fire Department collecting bunker gear from paramedics

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Chicago Fire Department paramedics have been told to turn in their "bunker gear" - the heavy, protective pants, suspenders, coat and helmet — because the department says they don't need it. The union begs to differ. | File photo

Fran Spielman

The Chicago Fire Department is making another round of changes that, a union leader warned Monday, could put the lives of paramedics and the general public in danger.

Two years ago, self-contained breathing apparatus were removed from all 75 Chicago ambulances. In addition, 70 paramedics graduating from the fire academy were not issued fire helmets, boots and protective clothing, known as “bunker gear,” that are standard issue for firefighters.

Now, the Fire Department is collecting bunker gear from all paramedics.

“Local 2 believe the removal of the bunker gear from our paramedics is not in the best interest of our membership,” Tom Ryan, president of the Chicago Firefighters Union Local 2 wrote in a text message to the Chicago Sun-Times.

“Chicago’s paramedics face extremely dangerous situations every day on every shift. These dangers are often unforeseen and unpredictable. With Chicago not only being a national but an international destination, we must be prepared to respond to any and all emergencies.”

The decision to strip paramedics of equipment bought just for them was announced in a May 4 memo signed by Assistant Deputy Fire Commissioner Mark Nielsen, who runs the Bureau of Operations.

The memo outlines a schedule of pick-up locations and dates starting May 15 and ending June 5.

“Items to be returned are: (1) bunker coat, (1) bunker pants, (1) bunker suspenders. In addition, paramedic field chiefs shall return their ... face pieces,” Nielsen said.

“Members who are missing equipment shall follow current policies and procedure for lost/stolen equipment and shall submit a Form 2 through the chain of command to District Chief Juan Hernandez. Members shall be held accountable for the replacement cost of missing items per collective bargaining agreement.”

Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford acknowledged that the decision to collect bunker gear from veteran paramedics marked the end of an era for the Chicago Fire Department.

But, he categorically denied that it was a dangerous decision.

“They have had it for a long time, but it’s clear they did not need it because they are NEVER sent into an area where they need to wear such gear,” Langford wrote in an email to the Chicago Sun-Times.

“If a situation comes up that requires a paramedic in a fire area or dangerous location, they will send in a FIRE paramedic not a single role paramedic. In other words, a paramedic from a truck or engine company not a paramedic from an ambulance. Since ambulance paramedics don’t go into those situations, they do not need that type of gear.”

Langford said there’s a big difference in role and equipment between paramedics and emergency medical technicians.

“EMT’s are firemen and they do have full bunker gear because they work on engines and trucks. Only paramedics now work ambulances. That has been the case for over a year. Paramedics have bunker gear, but do not use it because they do not enter fire areas. So, we opted to replace bunker for paramedics after the current stuff expired,” Langford wrote.

“They will now get clothing that is better suited to what they do. Stuff that is lighter in weight and designed to be protective against fluids and such. Ambulance paramedics never go into fires or nasty areas.. so why put them in full bunker gear?? Same goes for breathing tanks. Ambulance paramedics did not have a need, so that was eliminated as well.”

A veteran paramedic, who asked to remain anonymous, argued that the policy change means that paramedics “can no longer go near a fire building or car extraction.”

“A few years ago, a single-room [occupancy] hotel at Jackson and Kedzie caught fire. People were jumping and paramedics had to go the building to get them. Glass was falling along with other debris,” the veteran paramedic said.

“Now, they would have to wait for firefighters to bring those patients to them. The CFD will tell you, ‘No worries. Firefighters will bring patients to the paramedics.’ But, it never works like that because they are too busy with the fire.”

The veteran paramedic called the policy change evidence of the second-class status paramedics have been forced to endure under the four-year regime of Fire Commissioner Jose Santiago. That's even though two-thirds of the calls are for emergency medical services.

"This administration can't stand paramedics. So, they will take the bunker gear away and give us some God-awful crap," the paramedic said.

Two years ago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel hammered out a new, five-year contract that called for Chicago firefighters, paramedics and emergency medical technicians to get an 11-percent pay raise over five years, but ends free health care for those who retire between the ages of 55 and 65.

The agreement also called for a dramatic upgrade in ambulance care. All 15 of Chicago's basic-life-support ambulances were converted to advanced-life-support, giving Chicago 75 ambulances capable of administering the most sophisticated level of care.

The decision to end a two-tier system that paramedics called a dismal failure followed investigations by Inspector General Joe Ferguson, WBBM-TV and the Better Government Association.

All three concluded Chicago needs more advanced life support ambulances to consistently meet response time standards.

The contract helped Emanuel win the surprise endorsement of Local 2 four years after the union endorsed mayoral challenger Gery Chico over Emanuel.

But a newly-formed political action committee created by 100 paramedics endorsed Jesus "Chuy" Garcia after the vanquished mayoral challenger promised to bolster Chicago's fleet of 75 advanced life support ambulances, create an emergency medical services commissioner on par with the fire commissioner and make the job of paramedic officer a tested position.