
As OT soars, city to hold firefighter entrance exam in 2014

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Last Modified: Nov 2, 2013 02:09AM

Amid skyrocketing overtime in the Chicago Fire Department, the city will hold its first firefighters entrance exam in eight years in 2014, but not the way a former-firefighter-turned-alderman would like it.

Ald. Nick Sposato (36th) said being a firefighter is a physical job, and candidates should be hired in the order of how they perform on the test of physical abilities, so long as they clear a pass-fail written test.

That's the way it was done in 1978 and again in 1985, when Sposato took the exam, with no lawsuit filed after either one of those tests.

Chicago's first firefighters entrance exam since 2006 will be conducted differently.

The written test will be pass-fail with passing candidates assigned a random number and called in that order as manpower is needed.

Hiring desperately is needed to get a handle on skyrocketing overtime in the Chicago Fire Department. It has gone from \$13.5 million in 2011 to \$20 million this year and is projected to reach \$35.3 million in 2014. The precise number of vacancies was not known.

Only after candidates arrive at the fire academy will physical fitness come into play. Would-be firefighters will be given a background check, a drug test and the test of physical abilities, all of them pass-fail. Those who pass all three will be offered spots in the next class of firefighters.

Sposato does not believe firefighters should be hired based on a “luck-of-the-draw” lottery.

“Firefighter is a physical job. In 1978 and 1985, guys who wanted the job trained and worked hard, and those guys were called first. Guys who didn’t train or work out ever were called later down the road,” Sposato said.

“I’d like to see guys ranked by physical ability. We’re giving you three months, six months, a year. You’re going to have to run up a flight of stairs, bench press, do whatever. Then, they rank you from that. That’s the better way.”

Sposato said he “went in cold” to the 1985 test of physical abilities and paid the price.

“I got called eight years after I took the test. I deserved that because I didn’t work out or train. Friends of mine who wanted it [more] and worked out and trained for three months, six months, a year. Bam. They were in the first group called,” he said.

Human Resources Commissioner Soo Choi refused to answer questions about the firefighters entrance exam expected to be held in mid-2014 after testifying this week at City Council budget hearings.

The city’s reluctance to call candidates on the basis of their physical performance may have something to do with a costly settlement approved in September.

Chicago spent nearly \$2 million — and \$1.7 million more in legal fees — to compensate dozens of women denied firefighter jobs because of a discriminatory test of physical abilities that City Hall has now scrapped.

Marni Willenson, an attorney for the plaintiffs, said the flawed 2010 test was an “almost pure upper-body strength” exam that had nothing to do with measuring the skills firefighters need to do the job.

The Emanuel administration agreed to throw it out and use a skills test developed by the International Association of Fire Fighters to assess bypassed female candidates for the next two classes of firefighters.

“Lots and lots of those women are not only capable of doing the job; they’ll be great at it. They knocked out very capable people and a more diversified workforce,” Willenson told the Sun-Times in September.

“If women can be on the front lines [in combat], clearly women can hold fire hoses. And 90 percent of the runs are now medical calls. The job has really changed.”

Earlier this week, the spotlight was on police overtime.

Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy said he expects to spend \$93 million on overtime this year, fueling demands for the hiring of up to 1,000 additional police officers at a cost of \$50 million.

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