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Driver airlifted after crashing into Burrtec truck in Victorville

Staff Writer, Victor Valley News

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(Hugo C. Valdez, Victor Valley News)



VICTORVILLE, Calif. (VVNG.com) — A man was airlifted to a trauma center after crashing head-on with a disposal truck here Tuesday morning.

It happened at about 6:37 am, near the intersection of National Trails Highway and Air Expressway and involved a black Mitsubishi Eclipse and a Victorville City Burrtec truck.

Based on preliminary reports, the Eclipse was heading northbound on Air Expressway attempting to turn right onto National Trails Highway when it crashed into a Burrtec truck heading westbound.

Deputy J. Dean said it appeared the driver of the Eclipse was unable to negotiate the turn and crossed over the double yellow lines and crashed into the Burrtec truck that was already slowing down to make a left turn.

After the crash, a major portion of the Eclipse was wedged under the disposal truck causing the driver to be pinned in his car.

San Bernardino County Firefighters required extensive extrication techniques to remove the trapped driver from the sedan. Firefighters requested the use of County Helicopter h325 and the patient was flown to Arrowhead Regional Medical Center. The driver sustained serious injuries but was conscious and alert at the time of transport.

No other injuries were reported and no other vehicles were involved in the crash. The crash is under investigation by the Victorville Police Department.

<https://www.vvng.com/driver-airlifted-after-crashing-into-burrtec-truck-in-victorville/>

Behind the scenes, Victorville Fire Department ahead of schedule

Shea Johnson, Daily Press

Posted: October 22, 2018, 4:45 pm



San Bernardino County firefighters from a pair of Victorville stations wrap up after extinguishing a small fire on Monday. Victorville city officials say they are ahead of schedule as they prepare to re-launch their own Fire Department. [James Quigg, Daily Press]

VICTORVILLE — The City Council recently approved mutual and automatic aid agreements with **San Bernardino County Fire**. It was the latest in a series of public-facing moves to ready the relaunch of the city-run Fire Department.

In recent months, the city has finalized a dispatch services with CONFIRE, expanded its fleet, introduced a fire chief in council chambers and solidified a nine-month contract with County Fire as a holdover until the second quarter of 2019 when the Victorville Fire Department effectively goes live.

But much of the groundwork has been laid outside the public purview.

“Those types of pieces have to be done behind the scenes,” said Fire Chief Greg Benson, who was hired in March.

Other top-level staff positions have been filled, including the division chief and three battalion chiefs. Since late September, conditional offers have been extended to 16 captains and 15 engineers, according to a city-provided transition timeline.

Interviews for the department’s 21 firefighter/paramedics were underway and all suppression personnel were anticipated to begin immediately after the New Year — nearly three full months prior to launch date.

“Before March 30, I need those guys that are going to be working in those stations to know that neighborhood,” Deputy City Manager George Harris II said. “They need to know that community.”

Benson, who last oversaw the start of a fire department in Illinois, said there was no immediate data on how many candidates were local versus outside the region. Yet anecdotally, he noted that a significant number of captain candidates had begun their careers with the Victorville Fire Department, which disbanded in 2008 when the city pivoted to the county for contract fire services.

In a sit-down interview last month, Harris II and Benson said recruitment has been the main priority, evident by completed hires, and the transition was ahead of schedule. It has been intentionally expedited — battalion chiefs were brought on two weeks in advance — to account for any potential hiccups. At the time of that conversation Sept. 19, neither said there had been any major roadblocks.

Cast as purely a cost-saving measure, and more recently as an opportunity to institute a Day 1 intra-department culture, the nearly year-long transition will continue through November with emergency medical services coordinator interviews, start date for a fire marshal and suppression personnel background checks.

But the process also hasn't been entirely smooth.

City officials have been forced to address along the way rumblings that they would close a fire station — Benson and Harris said they won't — and that the projections of 5-percent annual savings and \$3.8 million in reduced spending over five years will actually come to fruition.

It also has not been lost on city officials that they plan to hire 63 new employees even as mushrooming pension obligations hurt cities throughout the state. But Harris has said the city's CalPERS retirement system rates are far more affordable than the county's SBCERA, underscoring that pensions were an emphasis in the switch and not ignored.

County Fire union officials have persistently pushed back against the transition. Jim Grigoli, president of Local 935, reiterated Monday that union officials believe there are indicators that the city department will cost more.

"It's just a matter of opinion," he said. "Nobody really knows that until after you start something."

The union has most recently launched ProtectVictorville.com, and Grigoli said it was not meant to act as part of some anti-transition campaign. The website includes an FAQ that addresses key factors of the switch and rejects certain city conclusions.

"The reason we're doing the outreach," he said, "is just to let the people know the level of service that we provided."

<http://www.vvdailynews.com/news/20181022/behind-scenes-victorville-fire-department-ahead-of-schedule>

L.A. County firefighters earn massive overtime pay, busting budgets and raising questions

Matt Stiles, Los Angeles Times

Posted: October 21, 2018

Overtime costs at the Los Angeles County Fire Department surged 36% in the last five years, placing some firefighters among the highest-compensated workers in local government.

The increase comes as the department grapples with staffing shortages and several seasons of extreme wildfires. Yet some county officials and outside experts question whether fire commanders are properly managing their \$1-billion payroll.

The county recently launched an audit of the department's overtime costs and payroll procedures, though it will be months before that is complete. The Times conducted an analysis of the county payroll database, which lists salaries, overtime and fringe benefits received by about 100,000 employees in the last five years. The results show:

- More than 640 Fire Department workers received at least \$100,000 in overtime in the 2017 calendar year. By comparison, there were 28 such employees in the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, which has twice the number of workers, and 48 in public medical and hospital jobs. No employee in civilian departments of the county recorded overtime that high. Two dozen firefighters made in excess of \$200,000 in overtime.
- Fire Department employees represent about a third of the county's 1,000 highest-paid employees, joining the ranks of surgeons, anesthesiologists and pediatricians who work in its public hospitals. A few made more than the fire chief and the county's top executive.
- Among county workers who earned overtime, Fire Department employees received the most on average, by a wide margin. They were paid about \$49,000 each in overtime last year, while workers in other agencies, including the Sheriff's Department, were paid about \$8,200.
- Overtime accounted for about a third of the average Fire Department employee's annual pay last year. For other departments, the proportion was around 6%.

The high compensation — in a department that relies so heavily on employees working extra hours — has raised questions among experts who study employment and fire department procedures.

“It's wrong from a budget perspective. There's no way that the county should be allowing that to happen,” said Frank Neuhauser, senior research associate at UC Berkeley's Institute for the Study of Societal Issues and an expert on workplace insurance. “Somebody is not doing scheduling in the right way.”

Top county officials have launched a closer examination of the department's overtime.

Chief Executive Sachi Hamai, who manages day-to-day operations under the direction of the elected Board of Supervisors, recently asked the county's auditor-controller to examine the Fire Department's payroll.

The review began last month and will include interviews with department management about payroll and timekeeping, county spokeswoman Lennie LaGuire said. The goal is to provide “reasonable assurance” that overtime spending complies with guidelines, she said.

Auditors also are expected to review some of the top overtime earners and study whether the Fire Department has a process for receiving some reimbursement when it helps other departments with emergencies such as wildfires or hurricanes.

Such high levels of overtime, which is paid at 1½ times the normal rate, were driven last year by an “inordinate” number of major emergencies, including the Rye, Creek and Thomas fires in Southern California, and assistance provided to authorities in Puerto Rico and Texas after catastrophic hurricanes, according to a statement released by the Fire Department in response to The Times' inquiries.

The department has also struggled to maintain its staffing targets amid retirements of senior firefighters hired during the 1980s and as it catches up from a slowdown in hiring after the 2008 economic crisis.

“We're actually developing some strategies so that we reduce our vacancies so we stay within our budget,” Fire Chief Daryl Osby said in a recent interview, adding that it's fair for the public to take note of the department's costs. “They should be concerned. It's their taxpayer funds.”

The highest compensated Fire Department employee last year was Battalion Chief Tom Ray, who works in the department's fire prevention services bureau. He earned a base salary of \$175,000, an amount consistent with his rank, but was paid an additional \$283,000 in overtime, bringing his total compensation to about \$480,000.

The top overtime earner last year was Capt. Sergio Burciaga, who received about \$322,000 in extra pay on top of his \$126,000 base salary, pushing his total compensation to \$457,000. Payroll records show that he worked 7,449 hours in 2017 — the equivalent of six 24-hour shifts a week all year. He works at Station 105 in Compton.

Reached by phone, Burciaga said he was too busy to be interviewed. Ray did not respond to requests for comment submitted through the department. Several other fire captains and battalion chiefs were paid more than \$400,000 last year, the payroll records show.

Apart from the extreme weather in recent years, another constant driver of costs at the county — and many urban fire departments nationwide — is an around-the-clock staffing model, even in neighborhoods that don't have constant overnight calls.

That's a particular challenge for the county, which has 170 fire stations spread across more than 2,300 square miles.

The department has more than 4,800 employees and is responsible for emergency incidents in unincorporated areas and 58 cities with a million housing units and 4 million residents. In addition, the department also has 159 lifeguard towers protecting 72 miles of coastline — and a fleet of helicopters and water-rescue machinery.

To maintain what the department considers appropriate staffing, firefighters on average work about 10 24-hour shifts a month, with three or four people required per shift — regardless of the call volume. Sometimes more personnel are deployed proactively when weather conditions make wildfire flare-ups likely, Osby notes.

If firefighters or other emergency staff get sick or take time off for an injury, which can be common, the department asks — or sometimes assigns — colleagues to fill their spots. That's a practice known as a "recall."

The top earners volunteer for such assignments, said Battalion Chief Jason Robertson, a department spokesman.

"Those individuals who work that much, they never go home," he said.

One such firefighter is Capt. Rick Mullen, who leads a team at Station 72, a remote outpost at the western tip of the county, in the canyons north of Malibu. He earned \$404,000 last year thanks to more than \$260,000 in overtime.

Mullen, a retired U.S. Marine Corps colonel who is also the mayor of Malibu, was paid for working 6,599 hours last year — the equivalent of working five 24-hour shifts a week for the entire year, according to payroll information released by the department under the California Public Records Act.

He said he took extra shifts in many cases voluntarily, in part to avoid being recalled to duty on days when the City Council meets.

“I’m used to working a lot,” he said, recalling his career as a military helicopter pilot, which required long hours in the air and a tour in Afghanistan.

Mullen, who supervises a team of three, said fatigue is a valid concern. But his station isn’t generally disturbed by emergency medical calls at night, allowing sleep — time for which he and other firefighters get paid — but still requiring many hours away from home.

“My wife certainly tells me that I need to be around more,” he said.

Osby and other Fire Department officials say they have controls in place to keep firefighters fresh, despite the increasing pressures on staffing from vacancies and wildfires.

The department has caps on overtime shifts to prevent firefighters from working more than five of their long shifts consecutively or more than 68 overtime shifts in a fiscal year. Records released by the department show those caps are often lifted, however, when the department feels staffing pressure.

“The weather and fire responses over the past few weeks has been unrelenting and one for the record books,” reads one December 2017 memo from fire commanders — obtained under the California Public Records Act — that reinstated the overtime cap after a period of wildfire danger.

The wildfires that have strained the department — both at home and across the state, when it helps other agencies — could continue or perhaps get worse if the climate trends that the state has experienced this decade persist.

Osby said the department is focused on work-rest cycles, even when when dealing with extreme conditions, “but sometimes when we have major incidents, it’s all hands on deck.”

Such a workload can cause strain on firefighters and their families, but it also can reduce the quality of service to the public, the department’s customers, most of whom call for help with emergencies unrelated to fires, experts on fire departments say.

“Are we doing a disservice to our customer, that person who calls us when they have a fire, when their spouse is having a heart attack, when a child has been struck in the street?” said Robert Rielage, a former fire marshal for the state of Ohio who has written about fire department staffing issues nationwide. “They want someone who is fresh, well-trained and who can make good decisions.”

In addition to the strain on workers, overtime also taxes the department coffers.

About 1 in 5 dollars spent on its roughly \$1-billion payroll, data show, went to overtime pay. The department exceeded its overtime budget during the 2017 fiscal year — about \$166 million — by roughly \$46 million, according the a statement released by the department. Overtime spending during the calendar year is comparable: \$212 million.

That’s money that could be spend on mental health programs, housing or probation officers.

“This is a cost that requires trade-offs,” Rielage said. “The county has to give up something to pay for the overtime to these firefighters.”

The financial strain traces its roots to the 1980s, when the Fire Department experienced a surge in hiring. That has led to a spate of retirements in recent years, in addition to the normal attrition of about 100 per year, the department said in response to The Times’ inquires.

Another force driving the trend is the financial crisis of 2008, which drained county coffers and led to a downturn in hiring (and fewer experienced firefighters on the job today).

In addition, an unusually high number of firefighters have been placed on injury leave, opening more vacancies, the department said.

Some are skeptical about why such vacancies still exist a decade after the economic downturn, especially given that the department has hired more than 470 new firefighters since 2015.

Neuhauser, the UC Berkeley researcher, welcomed the increased scrutiny from the audit.

“Somebody is not doing scheduling in the right way,” he said. “The explanation that they give you that they have all these vacancies, my guess is they are keeping these vacancies so people can get the overtime.”

In a statement, the Fire Department said it’s working to address the vacancies with what it described as “unprecedented hiring” to counter the surge in retiring firefighters.

The average Fire Department employee’s paycheck is more than 30% overtime pay — a red flag, said Rielage, who served as chief and assistant chief at two city departments in Ohio before retiring.

“If I were doing overtime, and it reached 10% of payroll, I would said say, ‘Hmm, what’s going on here?’” he said.

That’s one question facing the auditors, who are expected to complete their report by December. So far the issue hasn’t raised alarms among the Board of Supervisors.

Only one — Supervisor Janice Hahn — responded to a request for comment.

“We have seen a massive increase in the number of wildfires in California and our Fire Department has sent first responders throughout the state and across the country to assist with natural disasters,” she said in a written statement.

“This has undoubtedly added to overtime pay. However, the auditor-controller is in the middle of reviewing the department’s payroll practices, and we will know more when we see that report.”

http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-county-fire-overtime-20181021-story.html?int=lat_digitaladshouse_bx-modal_acquisition-subscriber_ngux_display-ad-interstitial_bx-bonus-story

EDITORIALS/OPINIONS/LETTERS

Fire tax protest

James A. Hood, Newberry Springs, Daily Press

Posted: October 23, 2018

On Sept. 29 I sent you a letter questioning the method of tabulating the fire tax protest letters returned to the county. I stated that everyone we spoke to had received multiple copies of the letter of notification and questioned whether they would compare the total of returned protests to the total number of notices they sent or the actual number of parcel owners that were notified.

In your article on Oct. 17 titled “Supervisors pass fire tax” it was stated that the county had sent out more than 368,000 notices and received 11,472 verified protests — good for 3.18 percent of affected landowners. This makes it appear that I was correct in thinking they would use the total number of notices sent instead of the total number of parcels notices were sent to.

I am still in doubt as to the accuracy of the resulting count! It is time to re-evaluate the advantages of becoming Mojave County since the supervisors think I should pay more tax for the same zero level of service we receive in my area.

<http://www.vvdailynews.com/news/20181023/your-letters-10-23-2018>