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Shakeup at elevator agency; Safety chief ousting 3 inspectors, manager of troubled division

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Three state elevator inspectors who each missed an average of 157 days of work last year will be fired, and a former police chief who was recruited to overhaul the troubled elevator inspection agency will have his position eliminated, a Massachusetts public safety official said yesterday.

The **shakeup** is the latest in a 14-month effort by the Weld administration to improve the state's inspection of elevators and escalators. So far, the administration has experienced only limited success amid continuing controversy.

The changes come less than a week after an MBTA escalator at the Back Bay commuter train station in Boston malfunctioned, injuring 22 riders.

Commissioner Winthrop Farwell of the State Department of Public Safety said yesterday he intends to rid the elevator division of those inspectors who don't come to work, and to cut non-essential administrative jobs.

Farwell said the changes will allow him to hire additional inspectors. The **shakeup**, he said, should improve the performance of inspectors who want to keep their jobs.

"I have met with every inspector in the state and told them they are accountable for their work," said Farwell, whose office includes the elevator inspection division.

Farwell, who has been on the job for only two months and is the third public safety commissioner in less than two years, said he was also scrapping a planned \$ 50,000 renovation of public safety offices in the John W. McCormack Building.

Farwell said the position of Michael Healy, the \$ 47,505-a-year manager of the elevator division, will be eliminated. He called the position unnecessary, saying the division has enough supervisors. Healy, a former police chief in Hubbardston, was hired last year to fix problems highlighted in a three-part series in The Boston Globe.

The Globe found that almost 40 percent of the state's elevators weren't being inspected in a timely way, and many inspectors often worked half days or failed to perform any inspections on other days. Farwell said he is optimistic his actions are already having an effect.

In the first three weeks of February, an average of 490 elevators and escalators were inspected every week. At that pace, the state will come close to performing almost all of the required annual safety inspections, he said.

The increase in the number of inspections corresponds with a dramatic drop in the number of sick and injury days taken by inspectors. The Globe reported in December that the state's 24 elevator inspectors called in sick or injured an average of 77 days per person last year.

In the first six weeks of this year, however, inspectors used an average of only one sick day per person.

Farwell said one of the fired inspectors is Richard Eckler of Canton, who called in sick 102 times last year.

The Globe in December 1994 reported that Eckler frequently worked half-days when he was on the job. On one day, the Globe observed Eckler inspecting two elevators in a Brockton apartment building before calling it quits around mid-morning and spending the rest of the day shopping at restaurant supply stores.

Eckler is also the owner of Pasta-For-U restaurant in Stoughton.

Farwell did not identify the other inspectors slated to lose their jobs because hearings regarding their positions are still pending.

Healy was hired last January after several longtime employees of the elevator division were demoted. He had no experience in the elevator industry or with inspections.

Farwell said an improved scheduling system that was begun before he took office is helping to increase the number of inspections being performed.

In another change, the state will stop sending inspectors out to certify the 15,000 repair jobs on elevators and escalators every year, Farwell said. Instead, the company making the repair will be required to sign a permit indicating the work was done.

The state inspectors will perform spot checks on the repairs.

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