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PANEL URGES WIDE CHANGE IN FIRE DEPT. HUB REPORT FAULTS COMMAND, PROMOTIONAL SYSTEM, CULTURE

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The management of the Boston Fire Department is in need of a complete overhaul, including the appointment of civilian leaders to tackle extraordinary problems ranging from racial division on the force to costly and dangerous personnel practices, according to a report released yesterday.

The 58-page report by a special commission appointed 11 months ago by Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino calls for radical changes to the command structure, promotional system, and department culture. The panel described a department suffering from inept management and a blind adherence to traditions that no longer make sense for a modern firefighting force.

While the commission praised the performance of firefighters in the field, it warned that virtually every other area needed improvement and that morale among the department's 1,600 employees was low.

"Throughout the interviews and evident in the survey responses are a significant number of firefighters, officers and civilians who express a lack of confidence in the department and its direction," the commission wrote. "This lack of confidence is pervasive."

In all, the commission made 66 recommendations it said would elevate the Boston Fire Department to a national model. It said other cities have also faced some of the same problems as Boston.

Martin E. Pierce Jr., who resigned as fire commissioner last month in anticipation of the report's release, had no comment last night.

The union representing firefighters, which would have to approve many of the recommendations, did not return a call seeking comment.

Menino yesterday said he planned to immediately begin the search for a civilian commissioner to lead the department, ending a recent practice of appointing a fire official from among the ranks to head the agency.

The report warned that the next commissioner "should not be a political patronage appointment, but a manager with proven ability to operate a large organization and with a commitment to provide progressive and dynamic leadership." It also said a background in firefighting would be advantageous, but not a necessity.

Menino also said he supported the recommendation to add a new layer of four top managers, some of whom may also be civilians, to professionalize the management of the department, which has an annual budget of \$115 million. The number two position in the department would be a uniformed member responsible for day-to-day operations.

"The management skills need modernizing," the mayor said in an interview. "We are changing to fit the times."

A change in culture

The commission also called for a fundamental change in the culture of the department. It said many minority and female firefighters, who do not have longtime links to the department, often feel alienated. The panel said part of the problem was an emphasis on tradition that is out of balance with the desire to modernize the agency.

"Tradition is an anchor around our necks," the report quotes a firefighter as telling the commission. "The [fire department] has too many historians and not enough visionaries. Our fear of change is killing us."

Many in the department also complained of an "old-boy network" that created the perception that only certain people received plum assignments, or that others were disciplined unfairly because they were not part of the "in" crowd.

The panel said much of the racial conflict dates back 25 years to a court order directing the department to hire more minorities.

"Many other organizations that faced the same problems have moved beyond the decades-old issues and it is long past time for the Boston Fire Department to do the same," the commission wrote. "This failure by the department to address properly such important issues as race and diversity cannot be allowed to continue."

The commission found the department has also failed to improve the plight of female firefighters. It said sexual harassment training has been ineffective.

"In fact, there have been instances in which supervisors mocked the training, setting a tone of indifference among the firefighters regarding the importance of such instruction," the commission said.

There are only 12 female firefighters on the force, a number that could be improved with better recruiting, the panel found.

The commission said it was stunned by some of the management deficiencies that affect the department from top to bottom.

"Commission visits to Boston fire stations confirmed complaints from many firefighters of indifference to station maintenance, firefighters appearing out of uniform, and firefighting equipment in need of attention," according to the report.

"In addition, numerous complaints from firefighters regarding cigarette smoking in station houses and more than one source alleging occasional alcohol use at certain stations, further emphasizes what appears to be a lack of order and pride in many stations houses."

The commission said deputy chiefs have not conducted stationhouse inspections for a decade.

In addition, the commission said the department was doing little to curb an "alarming" number of injuries among firefighters. Two years ago, the department reported 429 injuries. In 1998, the number jumped to 971. In the first quarter of 1999, the number of injuries was 764, a figure that puts the department on pace to more than double the injury total from the year before. The rate of injuries among Boston firefighters is triple that of Boston police officers.

Firefighters out with an injury are paid more than when they are working because they receive their salary tax-free. The commission warned the system, while providing for those injured legitimately, could also be abused.

The commission, headed by former state Public Safety Secretary Kathleen O'Toole, was appointed in the aftermath of a three-part series in the Globe last February that documented many of the same problems highlighted in yesterday's report.

Shifts and promotions

Among the most contentious issues will be recommendations to change informal personnel practices that have allowed firefighters to customize their shifts and earn extra money filling in for superiors, as well as a proposal to do away with the current promotional system.

The report describes a costly and ineffective practice that kicks in whenever a ranking officer is absent from his shift.

If a deputy chief calls in sick, for instance, a district chief on duty is named acting deputy chief. To replace the district chief, a captain is named acting district chief. A lieutenant is then named acting captain. A firefighter is then called upon to become acting lieutenant. The bumping up of the firefighter requires bringing in another firefighter on overtime to replace him. All of the personnel moved into higher positions for the shift are paid at the higher rate of the new position.

On an average day, about 30 percent of the entire firefighting force is working in a higher-ranking job that they have not been trained to perform, the report said.

"This practice of 'on the job training' invites inexperienced and untrained members to assume supervisory and management roles in the department on a rotating basis," the commission warned. "Without adequate training, this awkward and expensive process invites neglect and abuse of department procedures."

The commission also recommended doing away with an informal system of shift-swapping. Many firefighters swap shifts to combine 10- and 14-hour shifts into 24-hour shifts. This allows many of them to cut in half the number of days they have to commute to work, and to work a second job on the side.

The practice, however, is so common that is not unusual for an entire shift of firefighters listed on the schedule to be off because of informal swaps, the commission found.

"The practice needs to be changed," the report noted. "Station commanders may not be aware of who will be on their team for a particular shift, and as a result, they cannot properly assess the strengths and weaknesses of their team prior to a shift."

Among the most difficult issues the commission said it investigated was the promotional system.

While the department has increased the number of minority firefighters hired in recent years, there are few minorities in the upper ranks of the agency and no women.

Many white firefighters view any changes to the promotional system as a back-door affirmative action plan to increase minority representation among officers at the expense of punishing higher-performing white firefighters.

But O'Toole, in an interview, said the current system is unfair to all races and genders. Promotions today are made strictly on the ordered results of written tests, with some firefighters promoted on the basis of scoring 1/100th of a point higher than the next person on the list.

"The ability to score well on a test, while important in school, is not the method by which we choose our political, industrial or military leaders," the commission wrote. "We believe the existing promotional system lacks the tools to evaluate candidates for such basic qualities as leadership ability, ethics, interpersonal skills, and understanding of the management process."

While not specifying the shape of a new promotional system, O'Toole said many departments now include assessment centers, where candidates are provided a scenario and must explain to a panel of experts how they would handle the situation.

Other cities also consider past performance reviews and oral interviews in addition to written tests.

O'Toole said changing the promotional system does not include a built-in advantage to minority candidates, but may result in more minority firefighters being promoted.

Averse to change

Some firefighters are leery of changing the system, worrying that political considerations could be included in the equation for deciding who gets promoted.

Among the other recommendations in the report are:

Annual physical tests for firefighters and improved physical fitness and wellness programs.

Expanded drug testing.

Requiring a high school degree for new hires.

Exploring the possibility of building a new fire station in the South Boston Waterfront area to house a unit that would respond to both the department fire boat and calls on land.

Ending the practice of assigning firefighters to the Long Island Fire Brigade outside the normal seniority process.

The report takes care to praise the performance of the department at fire scenes, and recognized the inherent dangers of the job, citing the death of six firefighters in Worcester last month.

"The Boston Fire Department is a strong, well-trained and fiercely proud group of men and women," the commission wrote. "It is unfair to suggest that the problems cited in this report reflect an attitude or culture shared by all its members."

In addition, the commission said the agency was "among the finest technically trained firefighting operations in the country."

O'Toole said she was optimistic about the future of the department and was struck by the "number of extremely talented people throughout the organization."

She said many of those people have been frustrated by the department's leadership and are anxious to help modernize the agency.

The commission met 30 times, including several meetings at Boston firehouses. Members of the commission also traveled to Kansas City, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and Phoenix to talk with fire officials and observe fire operations in those cities.

The other commission members are Mark D. Bolling, director of the state Office of Affirmative Action; William J. Good III, chief of the Boston Police Department's Bureau of Administrative Services; Vivian Leonard, director of the city of Boston's Office of Human Resources; Deputy Boston Fire Chief Kevin P. MacCurtain; and Francis X. Hartman, executive director of the criminal justice program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

To view the entire commission's report, go to www.boston.com and enter keyword fire.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO, GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JONATHAN WIGGS Former public safety official Kathleen O'Toole discussing the report on the Boston Fire Department with Mayor Thomas M. Menino yesterday.

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