



Short-staffed Springfield firefighters had to await aid from nearby towns before attacking blaze

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By **Richard Khavkine/The Star-Ledger**

SPRINGFIELD — Shortly past nightfall on Jan. 27, after the last flakes from three days of heavy snows had fallen on Springfield, gray plumes rose from a three-story house, billowing to low clouds lingering over South Springfield Avenue.

The fire inside the multifamily residence brought a quick response from the township's fire department. Within four minutes of a 6 p.m. call, firefighters were on the scene.

But that initial crew consisted of just three firefighters. Although they worked to secure water sources and stretch hose lines, the sheer lack of numbers meant they could not start a synchronized and aggressive response to the blaze.

That lack of "operational prowess," as one fire official who arrived a few minutes later put it, allowed the fire to spread.

Two minutes after getting to the house, next door to Antioch Baptist Church, a department captain showed up. So did a firefighter with a plow. Six minutes later — and 12 minutes after the initial call — crews from Millburn, Union and Summit arrived.

By then the fire, which started in a second-floor kitchen, had already done significant damage and extended into the third floor, said Union County's fire coordinator, Lathey Wirkus, who was at the fire scene at about 6:10 p.m.

By the time crews left around 8:30 p.m., the house was uninhabitable.

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Keith Addie/njfiregroundphotos

A fire rages in the 600 block of South Springfield Avenue in Springfield on Jan. 27.

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Springfield Fire Chief James Sanford, who was out of state at a training seminar when the fire broke out, said the department was thwarted by the heavy snows. Wirkus, though, said the department was hindered by something more threatening.

"That fire in Springfield expanded because they didn't have enough manpower," Wirkus said, adding it was fortunate the home's sole occupant was not injured. "They were totally undermanned to fight that fire."

According to the National Fire Protection Association, which establishes and disseminates firefighting standards and recommendations for departments worldwide, a minimum of 14 or 15 firefighters should have been on the scene within nine minutes.

Among those would be an incident commander, a water pump operator, four firefighters targeting two hoses at the blaze — each with one support person — and search and rescue and ventilation teams.

State and federal law also dictate the conditions under which firefighters fight blazes. For instance, the so-called "two-in-two-out" rule mandates that for each pair of firefighters going inside a incident scene, two must be outside and in constant contact with those inside. Firefighting tactics say that the best way to knock down a fire is to attack it close to its source, which means from the inside.

But fire officials say it would be foolhardy to use the two-in-two-out rule with just four firefighters, or even eight, on the scene.

Recent layoffs and retirements of hundreds of New Jersey firefighters are making those staffing levels increasingly difficult to meet, Wirkus and other fire officials said.

"It's taking and will take a longer time to get needed apparatus and manpower to the scene," Wirkus said. "Our ability to save lives and property is going to diminish."

Although fire departments have wrestled with staffing declines for the last decade or so, shrinking municipal budgets and New Jersey's 2 percent tax cap have slashed manpower to all-time lows in the last few months, fire officials said.

With lawmakers now floating sweeping pension reform initiatives that would carve into firefighters' retirement incomes, even deeper shortages could be on the way, they warn.

And while layoffs have occurred mainly in cities during the last year

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or so, smaller towns also are being affected, said Millburn Fire Chief J. Michael Roberts, who also is president of the New Jersey Career Fire Chiefs Association.

"It's across the board in terms of manpower shortages," Roberts said. He added that three-person crews on firetrucks, rather than the requisite four, is becoming the norm in New Jersey. "It's impacting us statewide."

Bill Lavin, president of the state Firefighters Mutual Benevolent Association, argues no fire department in New Jersey is safely staffed, according to federal standards.

"Some agencies may claim they are, but they are absolutely not," he said. "Now there's a vacuum, there's a critical mass."

Not everyone agrees on the impact of the cuts. Linden Mayor Richard Gerbounka, whose city lost 10 percent of its staff after it laid off six firefighters in January and another six retired, said the cuts are painful for those who lose their jobs. But, he said, residents are not at any greater risk.

"These layoffs are not going to affect (the) health and safety of our residents," Gerbounka said. "Rhetoric asserting anything else," he said, is "scare tactics to alarm our residents."

Springfield Mayor Hugh Keffer acknowledged his township's fire department is short-staffed, but he disagreed thin crews slowed the Jan. 27 firefighting effort. He said firefighters, including those from Union, were shooting water onto the flames from the outside when he arrived at 6:07 p.m.

"I don't recall that fire was affected by any short staffing," Keffer said. "We needed mutual aid, but you need mutual aid for every structure fire."

Keffer also said attrition, not layoffs, had cut into the firefighting contingent.

"We're working on solutions. We're not ignoring the problem," he said of himself and Sanford.

Newark Fire Director Fateen Ziyad said his department continues to comply with federal safety recommendations, despite last year's massive retirements. Ziyad said city engines typically ride with five firefighters and ladders with four.

Ziyad added federal recommendations are just that.

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"It's a standard that's recommended," he said. "There's no law that says they have to do it."



Keith Addie/njfiregroundphotos

A fire rages in the 600 block of South Springfield Avenue in Springfield on Jan. 27.

In all, about half of the state's firefighters association members lost uniformed fire personnel in 2010, according to the union. Newark has lost 80 firefighters; East Orange, 16; Orange, 12; and Hillside, 24, according to the state organization. The Atlantic City, Jersey City and Camden departments also have been hit by recent layoffs. A recently announced series of federal grants will allow some of those municipalities to rehire some firefighters.

William Dressel Jr., executive director of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, said towns are facing growing budget gaps

and don't have much discretion to close them.

"They (state lawmakers) have forced mayors and government officials into an untenable situation. They have no other option," Dressel said. "All that's left is emergency services because everything else has been cut."

That diminishing "operational prowess," as Wirkus put it, threatens a domino effect if neighboring departments are called to fires or incidents simultaneously, in responses known as mutual aid, such as during the Springfield fire.

That means staffing losses have consequences beyond the town where the fire is. Mutual aid used to be rare, but layoffs and retirements have forced fire departments with fewer resources to depend more heavily on their neighbors.

"The governing bodies are relying on mutual aid to fill their void. And that's not fair," Roberts said. "It's no longer 'mutual' — at that time it's abusive aid. Your lack of manpower becomes our problem," and consequently that of the taxpayers in other towns.

Police and firefighters could pose tougher foes for Christie

Ledger Live for Tuesday March 3rd, 2011 - Ledger Live with Brian Donohue. On today's show: Police, firefighters, and union leaders took turns accusing New Jersey Governor Chris Christie for unfairly blaming them for the state's economic woes. Unlike the fight against the teacher's union, this showdown could prove to be a tougher battle for the governor.

Apprehension is particularly acute in Essex County, where Newark — which suspended operations at three fire companies following the considerable number of firefighter retirements late last year — and Orange

have both lost firefighting personnel, all as a consequence of tightened budgets. East Orange — the county's second-largest municipality — laid off 16 firefighters last month, and West Orange and Irvington are considering layoffs.

Each of those municipalities borders at least one of the other four, which could diminish those departments' abilities to provide mutual aid.

"We don't have enough men to do our job correctly," said Roberto Perez, the head of Orange's firefighters union.

Perez, a 19-year firefighter, said the January layoffs of 12 Orange firefighters gutted an already strained department.

"We might pull up with a truck with two guys when it should be three," he said.

National fire standards say four.

According to a study the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology released in April, four-person crews battling a typical house fire can complete essential firefighting and rescue tasks 30 percent faster than two-person crews and 25 percent faster than three-person crews.

The study also showed late-arriving two-person crews can confront a fire that's twice as intense as one a five-person, early arriving crew would face.

"The more manpower you can throw at the fire the better off you are," said John D'Ascensio, Essex County fire coordinator and North Caldwell's fire chief. "If I can't help you, there's a problem."

Despite being unpaid, volunteer departments like D'Ascensio's also have had their ranks reduced as those firefighters struggle to make financial ends meet and often take second jobs far from their home communities. With volunteer departments sometimes entirely unable to respond, he said, neighboring departments are further hampered.

"It's a ripple effect," D'Ascensio said. "The bad economy doesn't discriminate."

But Lavin, the state firefighters association president, says even if urban hubs continue to run with four-firefighter crews, layoffs and attrition are forcing departments to also close engine companies, as in Newark. That means they also are running fewer crews.

The result, he said, is "a patchwork quilt" of departments when it comes to mutual aid.

"There's nowhere to take from anymore," he said. "The nail in the coffin in the crisis is the 2 percent cap, without question."

Lavin decried certain towns' "irresponsibility" for cutting into their fire departments and said while departments would continue to provide cover for neighboring municipalities, there are limits.

"We're not going to provide (mutual aid) staffing and leave our communities at risk," he said. "I'm hard-pressed to cover my own."

One possible remedy, Lavin said, is to exclude certain public-safety costs from expenditures covered by the tax cap. A bill Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union) introduced in September proposed doing as much. Without backing from top lawmakers, though, it has gained no traction and remains in the Assembly's Housing and Local Government Committee. Cryan, the Assembly's majority leader, called the lack of support shortsighted.

"I disagreed with it then and I disagree with it now," he said. "People, when they dial 911, they expect public-safety personnel to be there right away. We've got to address that."

Staff writer James Queally contributed to this report.

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