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County firefighters raking in overtime

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Firefighters risk their lives to save people and protect property.

Their work is exhausting. It requires them to be away from home for long periods at a time.

For their sacrifices, firefighters at the Kern County Fire Department are handsomely rewarded -- especially if they are willing to put in some overtime.

In fact, the numbers are staggering.

It is not unusual for county battalion chiefs, captains and even some engineers to earn more than \$100,000, thanks in large part to overtime.

Eighty-seven fire department employees below the level of deputy chief earned that much or more in 2001.

Of those, 16 earned more than \$125,000 and five grossed more than \$150,000. That puts them in the top 10 percent of all Kern wage-earners.

Overtime helped put some firefighters over the pay level of many private sector professionals and elected public officials.

Those often astronomical amounts are the product of a series of changes in department staffing schemes and shrewd deals made by the firefighters' union since the early 1990s.

County fire officials acknowledge some employees are pulling in hefty sums but say there is no cost-effective alternative to their current overtime system.

The figures came to light as the result of a California Public Records Act request *The Californian* filed earlier this year. The newspaper asked for a detailed list of all forms of compensation paid to each fire department employee.

Although county attorneys declined to release the names of individual firefighters and other forms of

compensation, they eventually did provide *The Californian* with a list of base salaries, overtime totals and total compensation paid in each position in 2001.

Until now, the county has only provided salary ranges for employees and department-wide overtime sums.

Even those numbers show staggering amounts of overtime.

More than \$10.2 million in overtime was paid to fire department employees in 2001. In the same time frame the department paid out a little more than \$29.1 million in base salaries.

By comparison, the Kern County Sheriff's Department spent around \$6 million in overtime, while spending nearly \$49 million in base salaries in the last budget year.

All told, the fire department salaries and benefits represent roughly 5 percent of the total county budget.

In some cases, fire department employees have been able to double their salaries by working extra shifts.

In 2000, at least two employees did so.

One captain made \$79,193.12 by working overtime while earning \$63,089.08 in regular pay. A battalion chief earned \$71,369.50 in overtime while earning \$68,921.96 in salary.

While documents don't show anyone doubling his or her pay in 2001, one battalion chief came close.

According to pay records, the unidentified battalion chief added \$78,258.69 in overtime to his regular salary of \$82,835.22. That put his total pay at \$162,500 -- enough to pay the salary of four entry-level firefighters without benefits.

That amount also is more than the chief of the fire department, the Kern County sheriff or the Kern County district attorney earn in a year. Most Kern residents don't come close to those figures. The median annual income in Kern County was \$35,446 in 1999, according to the 2000 Census. Median refers to the exact middle, with half the salaries being higher and half lower.

The majority of overtime is paid to fill spots left vacant by firefighters and their supervisors who are on vacation or sick. The county's deal with the firefighters' union mandates minimum staffing levels that must be maintained at each station.

Most stations must be staffed by three or more people. A smaller number have just a two-person staff.

It cost the county about \$6 million in overtime to maintain those minimum levels from July 2000 to June 2001. That's more than half the total department's overtime.

A smaller amount -- \$1.2 million -- was spent on overtime for special projects and to compensate station staff for working their unusual 56-hour weeks.

Another \$3.3 million was spent on overtime for emergency situations and to send local firefighters and supervisors to fires and disasters outside Kern County. Much of that money is eventually reimbursed to the county by state and federal government, fire officials said.

But the money spent to fill in for firefighters on vacation or laid up with an illness comes from local coffers and local taxpayers.

So why not take that money and hire a pool of firefighters to fill in for the sick or vacationing, substitute-teacher style?

The county used to do just that. Until the early 1990s the fire department had a pool of more than 60 "relief" firefighters who could fill in for vacationing or sick co-workers.

Those positions were eliminated during tight times as a cost savings, according to county officials. Around the same time, the firefighters' union got a key concession from the county -- minimum staffing.

"That's the root of this whole situation," said Scott Jones, county administrative officer.

Minimum staffing forces the county to fill any spots left empty by vacationing or sick firefighters. And since there were no more relief firefighters, that meant overtime for the remaining personnel.

"Frankly I don't think that was a wise decision," Jones said. "I would never have recommended such a provision."

Jones noted that the firefighters' union initially agreed to work that overtime at the regular pay rate. Kern County Firefighters Union President Ken Blanton said his members agreed to that deal to help the county through "tough times."

"We've done a lot for this county," Blanton said.

But over the past several years the union has been able to negotiate increases bringing firefighters' overtime pay to 1.5 times their regular pay. Jones says the county needs to make sure that's still a good deal.

"I think we need to review that again," he said. "That's our plan."

The county has already shown that hiring more firefighters can yield some cost savings. In 2000, Jones got the fire department to add 24 "extra" firefighters on staff to fill long-term vacancies left by retirements or serious injuries.

County Fire Chief Stephen Gage said the pool was created specifically to deal with a glut of retirements expected in the next several years.

By using the extra firefighters, Gage estimated that his department would be able to save \$2 million in the upcoming fiscal year. That would keep overtime costs for vacation and sick leaves to just \$6.7 million.

But even with the small pool of extra firefighters, the bulk of the overtime shifts are eventually going to be filled with overtime shifts.

And Gage still insists it is the cheapest way to do things.

"We're actually saving money by not hiring someone," Gage said. "Although it doesn't appear that way."

According to Gage, the cost of providing benefits to a new employee exceeds the cost of paying overtime.

To pay an existing employee to work an overtime shift, the county must cough up roughly 1.58 times their regular pay, Gage said. That cost represents the time-and-a-half pay as well as extra taxes the department must pay.

But to hire a new employee, Gage said the county would end up paying 1.69 times their regular salary. The extra cost comes in the form of retirement contributions, health insurance and other benefits.

Indeed, the cost of benefits usually adds up to more than 50 percent of the salary. For a top-level firefighter, the county has to pay more than \$29,000 for benefits on top of the regular salary of \$52,000.

"When I call someone in for overtime I don't have to pay into their retirement or pay for their health insurance, because I already paid for it," Gage said.

New employees also receive vacation days and sick leave, which would add to the problem of filling days off.

Gage downplayed a rumor that the lure of overtime was creating problems with filling deputy chief positions, called it an "urban legend." Those five positions are directly under the chief and are not eligible for overtime. The department had no problem filling three deputy chief spots earlier this year.

The chief did acknowledge that the glut of overtime does have risks. If workaholics were to grab up shift after shift, they could burn themselves out, Gage said. The department's overtime system is aimed at minimizing that possibility, he added.

Overtime for vacationing and sick firefighters -- which is entirely voluntary -- is offered to those who have worked the least amount of hours, Gage said.

"It's a balancing act," he said.

Even with that potential drawback, fire officials insist overtime is the cheapest way to get the job done. And there is nothing wrong with firefighters making the amounts they receive, added Blanton.

"If you are willing to provide a service and save the county money, I don't see how that's bad," Blanton said. "Otherwise you are saying 'I like the job you do, I want you to keep doing it but I don't want you to make any money.'"

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