

March 4, 2004

**To: Honorable Jeffrey Klein Assembly Standing Committee On
Oversight, Analysis and Investigation**

From: Vincent Dunn Deputy Chief, FDNY (Ret)

**Subject: The 2003 closing of six fire companies by the New York City Fire
Department**

What is the significance of response times? The significance of response times cannot be overstated. Firefighters must get to a fire before the blaze reaches “flashover”. Flashover is a room bursting into flame. There are three stages to a fire: Growth stage; fully developed stage and decay stage. Flashover occurs in the growth stage of a fire. A typical burning room can flashover after 4 minutes. The training video produced by the National Fire Protection Association “Countdown to Disaster” shows a room flashing over after four minutes. If firefighters arrive at a fire in time they can stop flashover. That is the significance of response time.

How do response time increases generally translate into danger to life, limb and property? During the growth stage of a fire the temperature rises to 1000 to 1200 degrees during flashover. For example inhaling 2 or 3 breaths of 300 degrees F hot air in a fire will kill a person. An exposure to a temperature of 160 degrees F. for 60 seconds will give a person a second degree burn (blistering). Exposure to 180 degrees F. for 30 seconds will give a second degree burn; and 212 degrees for 15 seconds gives a second degree burn. Ordinary combustible material ignites around 500 degrees F., and steel fails at 1100 degrees. Flashover at 1100 to 1200 degrees F. may occur in a burning room within four minutes. That is how response time increases translate into danger to life and limb and property.

What are the national standards for response time? The national standards for response time cannot be used in New York City. The 900,000 buildings in the city and its 8,000,000 people cannot be subject to national standards. The city of New York is not standard. There is nothing standard about this City. The height and density of buildings cannot be found any place else in America. The national standards are designed for smaller cities with predominantly private dwellings, two and three story row houses, and one story commercial buildings. New York has many more high rise buildings, taller high rise buildings. For example we have 30 and 40 story high rise apartments, the six and seven story dwelling, housing many of our most needy people. These buildings are almost nonexistent in other cities. The density and closeness of our buildings create a conflagration danger. The national standard has no relevance in New York City.

What are acceptable response times? The City of New York has used out of date response time calculations to justify closing six fire houses. Unfortunately, the FDNY does not have accurate response time information today. The last study on FDNY response time was conducted by the RAND institute back in the 1970s. The city's buildings, the city's population, and the city's traffic have changed greatly since then. The FDNY should be required to determine present day acceptable response times for different neighborhoods of the city of New York. Acceptable response times should vary depending on the neighborhood's building density, building heights, traffic patterns and the time of day. There can not be one single response time for all communities of New York City. New York must have a high rise urban response time, suburban response time, and even some rural area response times. The FDNY should be directed to conduct research and determine accurate present day reflex time measurements. But in the real world of today's Fire Department, the only measuring stick we have is the FDNY's outmoded formula. Acceptable response times today should be as good as, or better than we were able to achieve yesterday. New York City apparently gave up on that goal when it decided a smaller, cheaper Fire Department would suffice.

Have fire department response times changed since the closing for all types of incidents:

The City of New York's definition of "response time" is inaccurate, misleading and should be changed. The city's definition of response time – the time between alarm receipt and arrival of firefighters at the alarm box location- should be changed to a more realistic measurement of response time. In the 1970 President's Commission report, titled "America Burning" they defined a more accurate response measurement. It is called, "reflex time". Reflex time is the time from alarm receipt, to the time when the first hose stream discharges water on a fire. This measurement of fire response is more accurate than the FDNY response time, because after the fire company arrives at the box location, firefighters must do more. Firefighters must then connect to a fire hydrant, stretch the hose, climb up several flights of stairs, and search for the flames before they discharge water on the fire. These tasks must be added to the City of New York's misleading response time measurement.

The real increase in response time -reflex time- caused by the company closings, and firefighter cuts, has not been revealed by the City of New York. So, all of their findings are skewed.

Do the monetary savings of closing the fire companies justify whatever losses may occur?

Definitely, No. You can't measure, in dollars and cents, the value of a person's life or personal treasures. They call the Fire Department for help. Calls and cries on telephones, from voice alarm boxes, from real live people in trouble. They are not just "runs" or "responses". The bureaucrats like to use terms like "runs" or "responses" because it seems less imperative. They are calls for help often from terrified people. The monetary savings resulting from shutting six fire companies are gained by delaying firefighters getting to a man, women or child threatened by a fire or illness.

The effects of closing the six fire companies on neighborhoods will be a sense of reduced public safety.

It is not just longer response times to their cries for help. When a community resident passes by the closed, and boarded up firehouse each day, they will understand there has been a withdrawal of city services to their community. The closed firehouse symbolizes a reduction of safety provided to their family in case of an emergency.

The community may not realize, when they pull an alarm box or call 911 there will not be as quick a response to their family. A fire officer and 4 firefighters coming to save them from a heart attack, car accident, fire, building collapse, or hazardous materials spill will be delayed.

The effects of closing fire houses on the city as a whole will be:

When it is a dark night, to a person who chooses to walk down the street housing the fire station for safety- the City of New York has said, sorry closed.

As for so-called “verbal alarm”, a term used by fire fighters to describe a person running into a fire house reporting a fire- the City of New York has said sorry closed.

To people being chased by muggers running into firehouses for safety- the city of New York has said –sorry closed.

To drug pushers, street gangs, and street gamblers who do not gather on the block housing a firehouse – the City of New York has said go ahead, this firehouse is closed.

To the few firehouses that have become informal community meeting places, like the people’s firehouse, engine 212 in Brooklyn - the City of New York has said sorry closed; and yes, arrests the people.

The closing of six firehouses demonstrates this city administration, unlike the past one, is not interested in public safety.

What relation, if any, is there between the fire company closings and overall manpower rates for the Fire Department?

(30 firefighters a company) The city will reduce the fire department staffing by 180 firefighters and officers. There will be 180 fewer firefighters and officers on the roster of the FDNY because of six closed firehouses.

Yours truly,
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