



Chicago Firefighters Cite New NIST Study to Fight Cuts

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The study by the U.S. Commerce Department, the national firefighters union and other organizations focused on response times to blazes in 13-story buildings and found that crews of five or six firefighters put out fires and conducted search-and-rescue operations "significantly faster" than three-person or four-person teams.

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The Fire Department contract that lapsed in June requires five firefighters per truck, but Emanuel has left open the possibility of reducing staffing levels. There has been little progress in negotiations since then, but firefighters must work under the old rules for now.

While most of Chicago's high-rises are concentrated downtown and along the lakefront, Firefighters Union Local 2 President Thomas Ryan argued that other large buildings like schools and factories are found throughout the city and present many of the same challenges. He argued that the report "scientifically proves what we've been saying for years" and said cutting the number of firefighters at any firehouse in the city would put the public at risk.

Administration spokesman Bill McCaffrey said high-rise fires are relatively infrequent, so the report represents "a very small portion of properties and fires in the city."

"And Chicago has highly skilled and well-equipped high-rise response teams, a recently rewritten high-rise response protocol and strict requirements for fire safety in high-rises -- these are the most critical factors in maintaining safety in high-rises in Chicago," McCaffrey said in an email.

When introducing Fire Commissioner Jose Santiago in February 2012, Emanuel would not rule out cutting the number of firefighters per truck, saying new technology made change possible. "Safety will be paramount. Savings will also be an issue, and change will be an issue, because you cannot say technology hasn't changed and made us all better and smarter at doing what we need to do," Emanuel said then.

The union said in a letter to its members last summer that the city's initial bargaining position included a proposal to lower from 10 to nine the number of fire personnel required to staff a shift at the city's 57 houses with two firetrucks. But the union said most of the cuts the city was seeking early in contract negotiations came from reductions in pay bumps like the uniform allowance, duty disability pay and bonuses for meeting fitness standards that add thousands of dollars to firefighters' salaries and cost the city tens of millions of dollars a year.

Ryan would not discuss specifics of more recent contract proposals but said the two sides hadn't had "substantive talks" since late last summer.

It remains to be seen how deeply Emanuel will try to cut staffing. It's politically tricky for the mayor to seek reductions in the number of firefighters, because he could be blamed for undermining public safety if a tragedy occurs when there are fewer people on duty.

Ryan said Chicago's union had nothing to do with Wednesday's report, headed by the Commerce Department's National Institute of Standards and Technology. The International Association of Fire Fighters, the national organization for firefighter unions, was a "co-principal investigator" in the study, according to a news release from the Commerce Department.

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