



Fairfield Fire Commission
c/o Fire Department Headquarters
140 Reef Road, Fairfield, CT 06824
203-254-4700



1 September 2021

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: Workforce Diversity, Hiring Practices, & Recruitment

1. **Introduction** – Over the past year, the Town of Fairfield, like many other municipalities across the nation, has undertaken a process to review town policies, procedures, and ordinances to identify and address any elements of structural racism, discrimination or bias. The Board of Selectmen created the Racial Equity and Justice Task Force (REJTF) to lead this effort and this memorandum seeks to address equity and diversity in the Fairfield Fire Department.
2. **Background** –The Fairfield Fire Department uniformed workforce is comprised entirely of men who self-identify as white with two members stating that they are biracial (Latino). There are no persons of color currently serving as uniformed members of the department in any capacity. Two female professional firefighters hired by the Town of Fairfield since the Department was organized have since retired after serving the community honorably for many years. One female has since been hired but has not yet attended the Connecticut Fire Academy. Data is not available to determine if uniformed members belong to or identify with other minority groups, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ).
3. **Executive Summary** – Uniform standards for hiring, such as physical and written exams, have stood up to U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights review and several federal lawsuits as they have been found to establish non-discriminatory professional standards. The biggest issues affecting diversity in hiring are the small number of minority applicants and candidate preparation for those of lesser means and without access to the firefighting community, which is overwhelmingly comprised of white men, to help them prepare. There are things the Town of Fairfield can do to expand the applicant base and provide an opportunity for otherwise qualified candidates to better prepare for testing and other barriers to employment to level the playing field.
4. **Issues Identified** –

Recruiting

The most significant problem facing the Department's efforts to diversify the workforce is recruiting. At the present time, there is just one female and no persons of color on the list of candidates who have successfully passed the Testing Consortium's written and oral examination and the Department's final interview. The Department can interview additional candidates from the Testing Consortium list and does so as it forecasts future openings. A larger pool of minority candidates will help improve the hiring odds while maintaining non-discriminatory professional standards.

The Department has taken steps to address this, though it is clear further action is needed. In 2015, Chief of the Department, Denis McCarthy, proposed that Fairfield help create and



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participate in a multi-town application process for both the written and oral exam. Increasing the pool of applicants was one of the benefits. With the partnership of multiple communities, many with more diverse populations than Fairfield, the Department hopes to increase the diversity of its candidate pool.

This testing consortium has expanded over the years. Through the Testing Consortium, Fairfield has a much larger and more diverse pool of candidates than Fairfield attracted on its own. The Department has also conducted some recruiting at local businesses. However, a more robust recruiting effort is needed to improve the process and achieve the goal of workforce diversification based on the lack of minority candidates currently participating in the hiring process.

Oral Examinations

Candidates who have firefighter family members or friends possess an advantage over those who do not have experienced firefighters to help them prepare for oral interviews. Candidates who do not have those established relationships have had a more difficult time preparing for and passing the oral exams. As firefighting remains a largely white male profession, women and other minority candidates are disproportionately impacted.

Financial Barriers to Employment

Prior to Fairfield joining the Testing Consortium in 2015 the hiring process for most if not all of Connecticut Fire Departments created financial barriers to becoming a firefighter by charging separate fees for every department application filed. Since joining the Testing Consortium in 2015, Fairfield not only saved approximately \$20,000 biennially, by far the greater benefit was increasing the pool of applicants and reducing this financial burden. At the present time, a candidate pays one \$200 fee to apply to multiple departments rather than to each one. With region-wide recruiting our pool of candidates has increased significantly.

Candidate Physical Assessment Test (CPAT) –

Candidates must pass the CPAT before they can be hired and attend the Fire Academy. The CPAT is a practical exam used to test a candidate's physical ability to perform job tasks related to firefighting. The test is administered by the Connecticut State Commission on Fire Prevention and Control and other entities across the nation.

On average, 70% of men and 40% of women will ultimately pass the test with many candidates requiring multiple attempts. The CPAT test is not prejudicial in its design. It has stood up to numerous federal lawsuits and U.S. Department of Justice review.

The exam costs \$175 for each attempt. A five (5) day CPAT class, specifically designed for the first-time candidate, consists of 2 orientations, 2 practice tests and final CPAT. They have 3



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opportunities to pass the exam. The orientations explain the testing process and how the equipment works. Candidates have the chance to ask questions and try the testing equipment. The pass rate of those who attend the orientations is higher than for those who do not.

Locally the exams and prep sessions are offered at a state facility in Meriden, approximately 50 miles from Fairfield Fire Department Headquarters, during the morning and early afternoon on weekdays. The distance and timing make it burdensome for those of lesser means and/or who rely on public transportation. CPAT and Fire Academy fitness conditioning programs have been offered by the Fairfield Fire Department during the last test cycle and was attended by candidates of color and women. Similar programs continue to be offered by private providers.

5. Recommendations –

- Improve and expand recruiting efforts with a focus on increasing workforce diversity while maintaining professional standards and qualifications. Interviews with Chiefs serving in the Bridgeport, New Haven, Hartford, Yonkers, and New Rochelle Fire Departments suggest that Fairfield would be best served by following International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) recruiting recommendations¹ focused on the following institutions and individuals to increase workforce diversity:
 - Minority neighborhoods, churches and other community gathering places.
 - Gyms and health clubs with predominantly minority or female memberships
 - Social service organizations
 - Businesses frequented by minorities, athletic clubs, teams and events, military personnel — active or recently discharged
- Fairfield can complete the process to become a certified CPAT training facility or gain access to regional training facilities for candidate preparation.
- Fairfield can host a series of Firefighter Career orientations in partnership with other Regional Fire Departments. The orientations will serve to provide a clear roadmap for those unfamiliar with the application and testing process.
- Fairfield can host or co-host a low cost ‘How to Prepare for the Oral Interview’ program or series. Interested candidates should be referred to Oral Interview prep training courses in the region and at the Connecticut Fire Academy.
- Fairfield can participate in joint recruiting with other fire departments in the Greater Bridgeport Metropolitan region to recruit applicants. This process should have a focus on gender and ethnic diversity.

¹ <https://www.iaff.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CPAT-2nd-Edition.pdf>



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- Fairfield can host or co-host a series of low cost CPAT test prep program to help candidates identify and tailor conditioning for successful completion of the CPAT test. Candidates will be referred to external CPAT and Fire Academy Prep conditioning and training programs.
- Fairfield can work with local high school guidance counselors to identify potential candidates from within the community.

6. Next Steps –

- Develop realistic short term, mid-term, and long-term plans to improve recruiting efforts and candidate preparation to level the playing field for otherwise qualified applicants.
- Determine the cost of proposed recommendations in phase plans and ensure that fund spent will benefit the town of Fairfield.

Alex J Plitsas
Fire Commissioner

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