

## Your City, Seattle

Executive Department—Office of Women's Rights  
Susan Lane, Director  
Wes Uhlman, Mayor



December 29, 1977

To: Mayor-Elect Charles Royer  
From: Susan Lane, Director, Office of Women's Rights  
Re: Female Firefighters

### Background.

The underrepresentation of women in the city's work (less than 30% of total city employment) is due in large part to the size and dominance of certain city departments which until very recently have been "for men only." Among these is the Seattle Fire Department (SFD) which employs 970 uniformed personnel, i.e. firefighters. One of these is a woman.

### Attempts by women to become firefighters.

Large numbers of women, when given the opportunity, have applied to become firefighters but have been screened out at each stage of the application process. This process includes a written exam, oral interview, physical abilities test and Law Enforcement Officer and Firefighters (LEOFF) medical standards test. In March, 1975 the first women applied to be Seattle firefighters; 127 women took the written exam at that time. By the time the recruit class began in February, 1976 only 6 women were admitted. Five of these women subsequently resigned and they cited lack of upper body strength as the main reason for their wish to discontinue their training. The sixth, Lori Lokshas, was terminated by the SFD and, as a result, filed a charge on sex discrimination with the Office of Women's Rights (OWR). Barbara Beers was one of three women who resigned but was admitted to further training as a pre-recruit. She went on to complete successfully both the pre-recruit and recruit school. She completed her recruit school in December of this year and is working in probationary status in the fire department.

Many of the problems that contributed to the high attrition rate of female applicants in 1975 and 1976 were also encountered

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by the women firefighter applicants in August and September, 1977. In the summer of this year a pre-recruit training class was scheduled for September. Office of Women's Rights conducted a major recruiting campaign that resulted in 250 applications from women. Of those that took the physical abilities test, 28 passed. Twenty-four of these took the LEOFF medical standards test and one-half of the candidates were disqualified. (The failure rate for males is closer to 30%).

Several of the women disqualified appealed to the Civil Service Commission. Three were admitted to the pre-recruit program on the grounds that they were medically qualified. A total of 13 women began the pre-recruit class in September, 1977. Two have been terminated from the program. The remainder are scheduled to begin the regular firefighter recruit class in March, 1978.

#### Problem Areas.

There are at least two major problem areas affecting the success of recruiting efforts for women: the level of commitment of the SFD and the LEOFF tests.

The present pre-recruit program - lasting a total of 5 months - is by far the most extensive of the female pre-recruit training efforts made.

It does not, however, come close to the efforts that were made on behalf of males from 1968 through 1975. In 1968, under Mayor Braman and Fire Chief Gordon Vickery, a police and firefighter trainee program for the socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged was begun. An ordinance was passed and emergency funding obtained to get the program started. Most of the trainees were minorities. They were employed full-time to go to school and receive on-the-job training at firestations. Extraordinary efforts were made to retain trainees in the program, including bailing some out of jail and arranging debt consolidation for others. The program was open-ended; trainees remained in the program as long as they needed. Most trained for an average of 18 months before they were ready for recruit school. Non-competitive exams were given which meant that on the registers created, candidates were not ordered by rank. Of the 115 trainees, 71 entered recruit school. Most of them completed successfully.

This pre-recruit trainee program illustrates what can be done if there is clear commitment and cooperation among the Mayor, SFD, Personnel/Civil Service and the City Council. The current SFD pre-recruit program for women was agreed to by the SFD only when pushed by the Mayor and OWR.

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Preparations must begin now to advertise and plan for future recruit classes. OWR, of course, should play a key role in this process, but the ultimate responsibility for getting women as firefighters is with the SFD. There is a clear difference between being marginally cooperative and being truly committed. The success of future recruiting efforts depends on which of these attitudes the Fire Department and key city officials, particularly the Mayor and Council, take.

The second outstanding problem area is LEOFF medical testing. The problems lie both with the standards themselves and with the administration of the tests. The Lakshas case findings, when issued, will address the question of discriminatory standards. During the August and September recruiting efforts this year, OWR received informal complaints from women that raise serious question about the competency and fairness of the doctors who administer the tests. Two women were disqualified for being too short when there is no height standard. Three women were disqualified on the basis of lab tests that showed, respectively, anemia, pregnancy and a "probable thyroid adenoma". Tests by private physicians showed these results to be false. Two other women were disqualified on the basis of potential knee problems that private doctors did not diagnose. Several women complained about the insensitivity of some of the doctors which contributed to an uncomfortable and even painful physical examination.

These doctors have been retained by the City through the Firefighters Pension Board for 40 years. Yet, these doctors showed a misunderstanding of City and LEOFF requirements and failed to properly apply valid requirements. The Fire Department refused to review the pension doctors' decisions. Additionally, the women who attempted to appeal LEOFF results were discouraged by incredible red tape in the Fire Department, Civil Service and the local LEOFF Board.

Recommendations.

- 1) The local Firefighters Pension Board is chaired by the Mayor. Because this Board has such an impact on the administration of LEOFF standards the Mayor should consider either serving on the Board himself or appointing a woman who is sensitive to and cognizant of issues regarding women in the City's uniformed services.
- 2) The Firefighter Pension Board needs to review its relationship to the Pension Board doctors. OWR recommends that another medical institution, such as University.

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Medical Center or Group Health Co-op, be appointed to serve as Pension Board Medical Staff. An alternative would be to appoint female doctors who could give the competent and sensitive treatment to which all applicants are entitled.

- 3) OWR recommends that the City expand the female firefighter pre-recruit training program, using the model used by the previous minority trainee program.
- 4) Important changes have occurred in the LEOFF pension system. OWR recommends that all new procedures be examined to prevent any possible discriminatory impact these may have on women, vis a vis the medical standard themselves or their administration.

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