NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEW YORK POST, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2001

A DAUNTING CHALLENGE FOR FDNY

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A wave of retirements could hamper efforts to rebuild a Fire Department that is emotionally and physically devastated after losing 347 members in the Twin Towers terror attack, officials warned yesterday.

"I do have a fear that seasoned people will decide to pack it in sooner rather than later," said Peter Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association.

Fire Department insiders said the full impact of the disaster hasn't sunk in yet, because so many firefighters have been absorbed with the rescue effort and the immediate needs of comforting families, burying the dead and keeping decimated firehouses going.

But soon firefighters and department brass will have a chance to take stock, realize how many colleagues have died — and perhaps listen to friends and family members who may urge them to retire.

"A lot will say it's time to go," Gorman said. "The longer you have on the job, the more of the 347 people you know."

These concerns are coming to the fore as fire brass consider returning most firefighters to normal assignments and schedules.

Beyond a potential jump in retirement, a variety of problems face the Fire Department:

■ Replacing lost firefighters with new recruits.

■ Replacing the 95 missing firefighters who worked in special operations and rescue units, which require additional training.

■ Replacing the 89 vehicles that were destroyed in the terror attack, including 18 fire engines, 13 ladder trucks and five rescue unit trucks.

"We're like a four-engine plane and one engine is damaged," Gorman said. The department's immediate response has been to quickly promote 168 members to fill in the ranks of officers that were lost.

And 91 firefighters from the outer boroughs have volunteered for three-month stints to fill posts in Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn where firehouses were particularly hard hit with losses, said department spokesman Frank Gribbon.

With the rescue phase coming to a close, the department is now looking at long-term solutions.

A class of 150 recruits is midway through its 25-week training period.

A second class of 300 that was originally scheduled to hit the books in January will now begin the first week of November, officials said.

Some 600 more recruits each will receive training in the first half of next year.

The Fire Department has never had trouble recruiting new members, but officials are now wondering if the heavy toll of the WTC disaster will dissuade people from joining.

It can take as long as a year to train a firefighter to work on specialized teams, officials said.

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