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FDNY redeploys safety battalion

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The Fire Department has temporarily disbanded its safety battalion so it can deploy the unit's chiefs to interview firefighters about the events of Sept. 11, the Daily News has learned.

The interviews will provide a comprehensive look at exactly where each fire company responded on the morning of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center, and will help pinpoint where the 341 firefighters and two FDNY emergency medical technicians lost in the attacks died, fire officials said.

"We have families who do not know where their loved ones were," said FDNY spokesman Frank Gribbon. "The department needs to get as much information from the firefighters about what happened there as we can."

But the move to disband the safety battalion has drawn the ire of fire union officials, who say the move puts firefighters at risk.

Before this week, the safety battalion's major responsibility was to respond to any fire above two alarms to assess the danger to firefighters.

"This is unacceptable," said Chief Nick Visconti, an official of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association. "We had a fire that injured 40 firefighters last week, and a plane crash earlier this month. We need these safety chiefs in the field."

On orders from Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, the four chiefs and four firefighters assigned to the safety battalion began conducting the interviews Tuesday morning.

In the months after the attacks, union officials said, firefighters have been reluctant to talk to investigators from the Bureau of Investigation and Trials, which is the judicial end of the Fire Department and handles disciplinary issues. Some fear that FDNY brass want to blame firefighters for any mistakes made in responding to the attacks, sources in the union said.

Union officials, who have been strident in their criticism of Von Essen since Sept. 11, contend the commissioner is retaliating for the lack of cooperation by disbanding the safety battalion.

But Gribbon said the safety chiefs are being reassigned only for two to three weeks because it is imperative the FDNY gets a clearer picture of where each firefighter died.

Gribbon noted that union officials suggested using safety chiefs to conduct the interviews. Union officials acknowledged that, but said they didn't want to lose the unit, even temporarily.

Gribbon said the FDNY is not compromising safety.

"Every chief has been trained as a safety coordinator who will be responding to alarms second and above," Gribbon said. "If the incident commander needs a safety chief to respond to a fire, they can special-call them."

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