

Volunteer fire aide unit dissolved after 30 years

By Robert Blau
Chicago Tribune 7-25-89

The Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Services volunteer unit has been disbanded because of concerns over liability for the 30-member group, union objections, and the high cost of maintaining the unit's South Side firehouse, Chicago Fire Department officials said Monday.

The unit, which has helped firefighters at extra-alarm fires for the last 30 years, served its last official watch on Friday night when it responded to a church fire on the North Side, unit members said.

Typically, the volunteers hold down water hoses for firefighters, transport lighting equipment to nighttime fires and help clear debris.

"With all their good intentions, they [the volunteers] become culpable and liable, and the city has to pay medical bills," said Francis Moriarty, deputy coordinator of Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Services.

Scott LaGreca, a Fire Department spokesman, said two volun-

teers were injured in 1989 at an expense to the city. In 1986, an 80-year-old woman died after being struck by a vehicle driven by one of the volunteers, LaGreca said.

Members of the unit expressed anger and frustration over the Fire Department's decision.

"Everyone is looking for volunteers," said Anthony Behland, a member of the group for the last nine months. "Here they're throwing away a volunteer program that really helps people out."

Moriarty said that the Fire Department is studying ways of using volunteers in areas other than field operations, such as manning emergency phones or helping with dispatch operations.

But the volunteers said that assisting at the scene of a fire is what made the effort worthwhile.

LaGreca said that the cost of maintaining the volunteers' firehouse and equipment at 1643 W. 43d St. is approximately \$64,000 a year.