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Chicago's Inspector General: Fire 54 firefighters for alleged fraud

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Chicago's Inspector General is recommending the termination of 54 firefighters assigned to the Fire Department's scandal-scarred Fire Prevention Bureau for allegedly falsifying mileage used to reimburse them for driving their personal vehicles to inspections.

The alleged fraud cost Chicago taxpayers more than \$100,000 in 2009 alone, but has been going on for years, the sources said.

Confronted with evidence from GPS-equipped cell phones that have tracked several firefighters' movements since a 2007 scandal, sources said the firefighters have acknowledged padding their mileage expenses, in some cases for their entire careers.

"Some flat out said, 'This is what we're told to do. This is the way we've always done it, and I've been here since 1991,'" said a source familiar with the investigation.

The 54 firefighters targeted for termination by Inspector General Joe Ferguson represent half the bureau's employees.

Sources said Ferguson is recommending that Mayor Rahm Emanuel use the mass firings as an opportunity to fold the Fire Prevention Bureau's inspection functions into the Building Department.

That would make it easier for the Fire Department to absorb the cost of 111 bypassed black firefighter candidates whose hiring has been mandated by a federal appeals court.

Fire Commissioner Robert Hoff has not yet acted on Ferguson's recommendations. But, Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford said, "If warranted, the discipline will be swift and precise" in accordance with the collective bargaining agreement.

Sources said Hoff has already demoted Nick Russell, deputy commissioner of the Fire Prevention

Bureau, and Sal Marquez, the deputy chief who works under him, for exercising lax supervision.

Russell's annual salary is \$178,740. Marquez gets \$162,012 a year.

"When he's made aware of deficiencies in senior leadership positions, he knows that it's important to quickly take action to ensure that the right leadership is in the right place. That includes that bureau," Langford said of Hoff, without revealing specifics.

Firefighters assigned to the Fire Prevention Bureau do not have Fire Department vehicles.

They go into the office each day, get a list of locations to inspect and use their personal vehicles to criss-cross the city. They keep track of their mileage and get reimbursed based on how far they've traveled. They are not reimbursed for their daily commute.

The Fire Prevention Bureau has been a steady source of controversy over the years.

In October, 2007, then-Fire Commissioner Ray Orozco launched an internal investigation of the bureau, put all 100 inspectors on a shorter leash and ordered them to carry GPS-equipped cell phones to track their movements after a TV station caught an inspector conducting personal business on city time.

One year later, eight inspectors were fired and two others retired after being accused of accepting or facilitating cash payments — of several hundred dollars per inspection — in exchange for making weekend pump inspections at high-rises.

The Fire Prevention Bureau was subsequently placed in the hands of Russell, former president of the African-American Firefighters Union.

Before the promotion, Russell had spent years protesting hiring and promotion practices in the Fire Department and had received an anonymous death threat during the 2004 uproar over racist transmissions over fire radio.

The Chicago Sun-Times disclosed the investigation of alleged mileage fraud last fall. The following day, then-Mayor Richard M. Daley took a bow for internal controls and technology upgrades that allowed Ferguson to catch the expense account padding.

"In 2007, there were allegations of misconduct. ... At that time, Commissioner Orozco immediately worked on it. People were suspended, left their jobs. Some were disciplined. They corrected it immediately in 2007. And that's what good management is all about," Daley said at the time.

Last week, Emanuel vowed to make the tough choices Chicago has avoided for a decade — without raising taxes, cutting police or using one-time revenues — to erase a \$635.7 million budget shortfall that will rise to \$790 million by 2014.

The Civic Federation has urged the new mayor to cut the Fire Department's \$526.5 million budget by re-evaluating everything from minimum staffing requirements for fire apparatus and the number and location of fire stations to possible outsourcing and ways to reduce disability absences. The review would be the first since the largely ignored 1999 report by the Tri-Data Corp.

Ferguson has also proposed reducing minimum staffing levels on fire apparatus only to be bombarded with criticism from Hoff and Chicago aldermen.
