

Chicago Fire Department eliminates volunteer unit

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By Philip Franchine

A 30-member volunteer unit that for 30 years has assisted firefighters in battling extra-alarm blazes has been disbanded because of liability and other costs, a Fire Department spokesman said.

For years, volunteers with Chicago's former civil defense team have helped at evening fires by bringing and manning an extra light truck equipped with high-intensity lights and generators used to power electric saws or other tools, Department spokesman Scott LaGreca said.

Supervised by the department's Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Services unit that replaced the civil defense program, they operated from the old fire station at 1653 W. 43rd. They also cleared streets of branches after storms and pumped out basements after floods, former volunteer chief

Gary Altwasser said.

LaGreca said Chief Francis Moriarity, deputy coordinator of EPDS, ordered the volunteer unit disbanded by Tuesday and Altwasser said he locked the building last Monday morning because Moriarity's decision so discouraged the volunteers.

The unit was ordered disbanded because, LaGreca said, it cost \$100,000 a year, including \$30,000 for liability insurance premiums and \$50,000 in maintenance costs. The fire department has several other light trucks operated by staff, LaGreca said.

"It's a large financial outlay for the returns we were getting for this service," La Greca said.

The fire station on 43rd Street will be used by the fire department or another city agency and the light truck and other equipment there will go to the fire department, LaGreca said.