

Fire Dept. volunteers' desire burns brightly

By Phillip J. O'Connor

An elite group of 45 volunteers who speed to the scene of all extra-alarm fires, explosions and other disasters in the city saved the Fire Department an estimated \$280,000 last year in manpower costs.

The volunteers, who have received little public recognition, have full-time jobs but devote much of their spare time to the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Service's Fire and Rescue Division.

They are not paid for their work with EPDS—known as Civil Defense until 1976—and each must pay out-of-pocket costs of about \$830 a year, said Edward Karas, 29, the group's chief since 1977.

"These guys are really dedicated," said Karas, who estimated the \$280,000 savings to the city. "It is a personal sacrifice in time and money to belong. Our members all stand watch and work."

Karas said the \$830 is spent by members annually on monthly firehouse dues, uniforms, meals away from home and transportation costs to the firehouse.

IF A MEMBER CHOOSES to drive directly from his home to the scene of a fire or other emergency, he must pay for his own gasoline, Karas said.

He added that out-of-pocket expenses for him and his two deputy chiefs, Kenneth Wood and Walter Wenzel, total about \$1,900 yearly apiece because they respond to more emergencies and drive about 8,000 miles a year.

The city does provide volunteers with fire coats, boots and helmets and \$5,000 in medical insurance in case of injury, the chief said.

"Everybody thinks we're federally funded. We're not," said Karas, the father of two young children and a lumber company truck driver.

Most volunteers are in their 20s and about three-fourths are married.

"Some wives put their foot down as the guys get older because our volunteers put in so much time," Karas said.

Scott Andrews, 22, a Loop-store detective, said, "Girlfriends also have been known to put their foot down."

Andrews said he joined because he has been interested in the Fire Department since he was a child. He said he volunteers up to 30 hours a week.

THE VOLUNTEER UNIT, WHICH Karas said put in a total of about 28,000 man-hours last year, is headquartered in an old firehouse at 1653 W. 43rd St.

Members learn to operate fire rigs and equipment during their duty watches and at special training sessions, held at the fire academy and Michael Reese Hospital.

Karas cited these uses of EPDS manpower and equipment, most of it military surplus, in the last couple of years:

- Acting as stretcher bearers and transport teams at the America's Marathon here last September.
- Towing more than 100 Fire Department vehicles from snowbanks during the 1979 blizzard.

- Having more than 30 volunteers work at the scene of the American Airlines DC-10 crash that killed 273 people May 25, 1979, near O'Hare Airport, remaining at the scene for three days in the search for victims.

- Providing 20 volunteer stretcher-bearers on Pope John Paul II's October, 1979, Chicago visit.

- Removing hundreds of trees and large branches from houses, autos, streets and sidewalks after windstorms last summer.

- Thawing out fire hydrants at extra-alarm fires during winter months.

- Pumping out basements of churches, schools, businesses and private homes after fires.

- Breaching walls and floors at fires to allow more effective water application, and using heavy equipment to raise large

beams at building collapses and explosions.

- Using the group's winch to recover numerous autos from the Chicago River and Lake Michigan.

- Providing light wagons at extra-alarm fires and at Chicago-Fest, Venetian Night and other events.

- Relieving engine companies at the scene of lengthy fires.

Each volunteer with a full-time day job must stand four nightly watches a month—from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m., Karas said. Last April, a busy month, members of the unit worked a total of 3,386 hours, he said.

Fire-alarm dispatchers automatically dispatch EPDS equipment on explosions, train wrecks, building collapses, plane crashes, confirmed fires in nursing homes and hospital facilities, and confirmed daytime fires in schools.