



City of Long Beach
Working Together to Serve

Office of Gerrie Schipske
Councilwoman, Fifth District
Memorandum
R-8

Date: August 12, 2008

To: HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

From: Councilwoman Gerrie Schipske, Fifth District (S)

Subject: **AGENDA ITEM: Request for Report from City Manager on Plan to Resolve Gender Equity Problems in City Fire Stations Prior to Building New Facilities**

BACKGROUND

The City of Long Beach has been informed on numerous occasions over the past several years that several of the fire stations lack appropriate accommodations for male and female firefighters.

Several female firefighters just recently attended a Fifth District meeting at which the Mayor was present, during which they demonstrated that they were forced to use buckets and trash cans for their bathroom.

Additionally, I have personally toured these fire stations and found the accommodations are not appropriate for both sexes.

The Council has proposed a parcel tax to fund the building of new fire stations. Obviously, these stations cannot be built in less than 5 years, thereby exposing the City to possible litigation and contractual grievances concerning inappropriate working conditions.

The following information from the United States Fire Administration's "The Changing Face of the Fire Service: A Handbook on Women in Firefighting" is most telling as to what the City needs to do and aptly points out that "***A lawsuit costs a lot more than a locker room, and in the end, no one wins***":

"A few fire departments assign women only to stations that 'have facilities for women.' This is not generally considered an acceptable long-term solution, particularly where there is an appreciable difference in the kind of work carried out at the different stations -a lighter or heavier call load, different types of apparatus, specialty teams-or where station assignments are on a seniority bid basis and the woman would otherwise be entitled to bid for the off-limits stations. The result can be an unworkable inflexibility for management, particularly if it prevents women from 'roving' or 'floating' to certain stations for one or a few shifts. It can also generate resentment from male co-workers that the woman doesn't have to take her turn at roving,

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particularly if her low seniority would normally make this part of her job. And it is unfairly restrictive of the woman, if she is not permitted to make shift exchanges or time trades with firefighters at certain stations.

The impact of inadequate facilities

One fire service observer, commenting on the problem of inadequate station facilities, wrote: Under the best circumstances, bad facilities are an inconvenience which women suffer from in far greater proportion. Under the worst conditions, poor facilities can lead to problems with morale and job performance, and an increase in the occurrence of harassment. At least one discrimination lawsuit has been filed which was due in part to inadequate facilities. ***A lawsuit costs a lot more than a locker room, and in the end, no one wins.***

When the need for women's facilities in the fire station is neither recognized nor addressed, the department may be saying that women are not important enough here to deserve decent facilities, that women may not be around long enough to warrant planning for the future, that women are not wanted at this station, and this is a reasonable way to keep them out; or that we are too busy here to consider the real needs of our personnel. All of these are harmful messages, both for women and for the organization of which they are a part. There are two common effects of forcing firefighters in a newly integrated workforce to occupy inadequate facilities. One is that the women are blamed for 'causing' the problem. Even though it is the design of the station that is lacking, the feeling among the men is often that since 'there wasn't a problem until she got here,' it's the woman firefighter's fault. Solutions such as bumping an officer out of his private room to give it to the woman can generate a similar resentment. Where this type of hostility exists, providing facilities that offer privacy for both genders becomes only half of the solution. It is important for management to make it clear that alterations to the facilities are being done not 'for the women' but for better privacy for women and men alike.

Women and men in the workforce -and particularly women, if they are in the minority or are the newest firefighters -will usually adapt to situations that are less than ideal... But just because a person... can develop behaviors to cope with a situation or environment doesn't mean it's right to leave things that way indefinitely.

Another common reaction to inadequate station facilities is the tendency to adapt and accommodate to them. Women and men in the workforce -and particularly women, if they are in the minority or are the newest firefighters -will usually adapt to situations that are less than ideal. Many women firefighters do not

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routinely shower at work, or they get up an extra hour early in the morning in order to shower before the men need the shower facilities. Women have learned to use broom closets as changing rooms; firefighters of both genders develop the habit of looking for feet under the restroom stall walls. But just because a person or group can develop behaviors to cope with a situation or environment doesn't mean it's right to leave things that way indefinitely. All firefighters deserve some basic privacy, either individually or by gender, for personal functions. Management should make it a priority to provide this.

Although crews in many fire stations manage to cope quite well with shared facilities, it is preferable for station design to provide privacy for both sexes in restroom, shower, and changing areas. The issue of separate bunkrooms for women and men is more controversial. As mentioned earlier, taking an officer's room away to give to a woman firefighter usually creates hard feelings. Tucking an ad hoc 'women's bunkroom' off in one corner of the station (such as a rollaway bed in the weight room) is inconvenient for everyone and a clear message that the woman doesn't belong. The most common solution is for women and men to share the one existing bunkroom. Many women firefighters prefer this arrangement, because it keeps them a part of the crew and a part of the information-sharing process that begins as soon as a call comes in. On the other hand, some men and women are not at all comfortable sharing a bunkroom in this fashion.

The real long-term solution to the bunkroom question is to provide privacy for everyone. Many new firehouses are now being built to a design that features cubicles containing a bed, desk, lamp, and three or four lockers (for one person on each shift), with a curtain across the doorway. This provides privacy and a reduction of sound or light from the others in the room. (Snoring may be a common source of humor among firefighters, but routinely being deprived of sleep by one or more snoring co-workers is also a significant source of job-related stress.) If the partitions do not extend all the way to the ceiling, the open space at the top allows for air circulation and allows emergency tones and information to be heard.

This is a solution that pleases everyone and doesn't pit the women against the men, the paramedics against the suppression personnel, or the officers against the firefighters. It also avoids controversies over whether the women's bunkroom in the new station should be the same size as the men's bunkroom, whether men are allowed to use the women's bunkroom if no women are assigned to the station

on that shift, whether a station that houses two officers should have men and women officer's bunkrooms, etc. It is a solution that respects the privacy and individuality of all firefighters without regard for gender, and for that reason is usually supported by all concerned."

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The City of Long Beach needs to take aggressive steps right now to remedy the inequitable housing conditions for female and male firefighters.

Recommendation: Request the City Manager to report to the City Council on a plan to resolve gender equity problems in City Fire Stations prior to the City building new facilities in order to reduce the City's legal exposure for failure to provide suitable working conditions for male and female firefighters.