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**Pay Parity Between Police and Fire Departments**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Pay parity between the police and fire departments has been a point of contention since their creation over two centuries ago. Many municipalities use parity of pay when determining salaries between the police and the fire department. According to the Oxford Dictionary, parity is quite simply “[t]he state or condition of being equal, especially regarding status or pay ” (Parity, n.d., para. 1). This means a police officer and a firefighter are paid the same, regardless of additional training, certifications or experience. Unfortunately, many municipalities believe police and fire department ranks are parallel and should equal a set pay grade without considering additional factors. The goal of both departments is to protect and serve the public. Each department could potentially suffer as parity does not allow them to be competitive when hiring new recruits. Pay should be commensurate with experience, education, and job requirements. This paper discusses the differences between each department in terms of job duties, public perception and expectations, education and training requirements, and different risks associated with each position. These differences should be taken into account when determining salaries for each agency.

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## INTRODUCTION

Many municipalities use parity of pay when deciding salaries for police officers and firefighters. City administrators and city management often compare salary and benefits collectively when deciding to hire additional staff. This can be both beneficial and harmful to prospective candidates. As police officers and firefighters have different requirements in terms of job position and duties, public perception and expectations, training and level of risk, it bodes the question of whether pay parity between the two departments should exist.

Although both positions are those of public safety, the two departments differ significantly in purpose and function. As these two departments were formed for public safety, many advocate for pay parity; however, pay parity should not exist. They are vastly different positions and should be treated as such. Police department salaries should be determined independent of fire department salaries.

Police officer and firefighter positions are those of public safety. Both are responsible for responding to emergency calls and both are public figures who serve and protect the public and property. This is where the similarities end. Police officers are responsible for enforcing laws and protecting citizens from crime while firefighters are responsible for putting out fires, rescuing victims, and treating the sick and injured. Both departments have storied histories with known policing by Roman centurions (Roufa, 2014a), and Benjamin Franklin is credited with the creation of fire departments (Independence Hall Association, n.d.).

Larry Hoover, a Professor and Director of the Police Research Center in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University notes, “[f]ormal police and

fire departments did not emerge until the mid-1800's" (Hoover, Dowling, & Bouley, 1996, p. 15). Wage parity can be traced back to their inception and has been a point of contention ever since. Originally, firefighters were considered to have the more physical and dangerous job and received a higher pay grade with police officers vying for pay parity. This changed in the 1950s, when police officers began to be compensated higher than firefighters (Hoover, Dowling, & Bouley, 1996).

Policing dates back to the days of Roman centurions who would patrol towns, especially market places to ensure order was kept and laws were enforced accordingly. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, citizens took matters into their own hands and were responsible for their own safety (Roufa, 2014a). The direct correlation of population increases in the United States and England in the late 1700's led to increased civil unrest, leading to the need to develop formal law enforcement with paid employees (Roufa, 2014a). History records show, "[i]n 1636, the city of Boston established the Night Watch, ...New York City established the Shout and Rattle Watch in 1651, and by 1705 Philadelphia found it necessary to divide the city into ten patrol areas" (Allan, n.d., para. 2).

One of the staunchest advocates for the creation of formal law enforcement was Sir Robert Peel, a Minister of Parliament who served as Home Secretary for the United Kingdom in the 1820's. In 1829, Peel established the Metropolitan Police Services in London. He is considered the father of modern policing and British police officers are known as Bobbies in his honor. The United States quickly adopted this method of policing along with Peel's recommendations of how police officers should conduct themselves (Roufa, 2014b). The first police force was established in 1833 when

“...Philadelphia organized an independent, 24 hour a day police force. In 1835 Texas created what was later to become the Texas Rangers which is the oldest statewide law enforcement agency in North America” (Allan, n.d., para. 4). According to Peele, “[t]he ultimate goal of policing is to achieve voluntary compliance with the law in the community” (Roufa, 2014b, para. 6). Police are required to enforce laws, patrol service areas to reduce and, in some cases, prevent crime, respond quickly when a crime is committed, maintain impartiality, and serve and protect the public (Roufa, 2014b).

Benjamin Franklin is credited for establishing the first fire department in 1736, with the formation of the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia (Independence Hall Association, n.d.). Benjamin Franklin took notice of the city of Boston having better success with planning for firefighting. Philadelphia was ill-prepared for firefighting, and he lobbied for the men of Philadelphia to create a better plan for fire-fighting. A plan was set and several departments were formed with volunteers who met monthly to discuss fire prevention, firefighting methods, and run drills to quickly and efficiently put out fires. Firefighters' skills improved, and Philadelphia soon became one of the safest cities in the world (Independence Hall Association, n.d.). The word quickly spread and soon other cities in the United States formed volunteer fire departments as well. The role of a firefighter is to “...control fires and respond to other emergencies, including medical emergencies” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014a, para. 1).

## **POSITION**

Pay parity should not exist. There are vast differences between the positions of police officers and firefighters. Not only do police officers and firefighters have different job duties, they also have different public perception and expectations, different

education and training requirements, and different risks associated with each position. These differences should be taken into account when determining salaries for each agency. Pay should be commensurate with experience, education, and job requirements.

Each department could potentially suffer by not being able to be competitive with salary when recruiting new employees. Each department would be unable to be selective on who is hired, instead, hiring the individual who may not be the best candidate for the job, but will settle for lower pay. This can harm the citizens as each department is unable to hire the best candidate, thus decreasing quality of service to the public. It is in the best interest not only for police officers and firefighters, but also for citizens that pay parity no longer exists.

Public expectations and tolerance of police and firefighters varies greatly. The public expects police to be visible and always available. Hoover (2010), a Professor and Director of the Police Research Center in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University noted, “[p]atrol officers in this decade must remain available for immediate dispatch to true emergencies just as in decades past, a desire to engender structured community contact or problem solving notwithstanding” (p. 161).

Citizens expect police officers to respond promptly and without delay. Hoover (2010) also stated that, “maintaining availability for genuine 911 emergencies is...the primary mandate of a police agency. It is the core of community responsiveness” (p. 161). This often leads police officers to work non-stop through their shift, not stopping for bathroom or meal breaks and often working overtime to complete reports, answer late calls, complete arrests and transport prisoners. Hoover (2010) also noted that

“[i]mmediate availability to respond to genuine emergencies, reasonable response times even to non-emergencies, and some level of visibility to provide feelings of security remain essential elements of police allocation, deployment, and scheduling” (p. 163-164).

Public perception between the two departments is vastly different. Citizens see firefighters as the nice guys who save kittens from trees, raise money for Muscular Dystrophy by filling their boots with monetary donations, and rush into burning buildings. Alternatively, police officers have the reputation as the mean guys, who give tickets for only being a mile over the speed limit. Unfortunately, “[t]he image of police that was left as a legacy of prohibition was one of incompetence and corruption” (Hoover, Dowling, & Bouley, 1996, p. 15). Police officers have been left with the reputation for unfairly writing tickets and never being there when you need them.

On the other hand, “the fire service [is] regarded as the more physically demanding, hazardous, and ‘sophisticated’ of the two services” (Hoover, Dowling, & Bouley, 1996, p. 15). The public expects firefighters to demonstrate unselfish courage i.e. running into a burning building to save the family goldfish. Strow (2011) stated, “Not only are firefighters held in more public esteem than police officers, but they also report the third-highest level of job satisfaction among all occupations (behind only clergy and physical therapists)” (para. 3).

Perhaps they enjoy their positions as “[citizens] are willing to pay firefighters to simply be on emergency standby for close to 99% of the hours they work as long as they respond professionally, confidently, and with courage when we need them” (Hoover, 2010, p. 162). Firefighters will disagree. When not fighting fires, personnel

perform equipment maintenance checks and participate in drills for additional training. As they are on call for 24 hours at a time, they have time to eat and sleep (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b).

For many firefighters, working in the fire department is their part-time job or the place they go to volunteer and get away from their full-time job. According to the Occupations Outlook Handbook for Firefighters on the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2014c), “most firefighters work 24-hour shifts on duty and are off the following 48 or 72 hours” (para. 6). This means most firefighters only work two or three days a week, allowing plenty of time off for working a second or primary full time job. Many firefighters are actually volunteer firefighters and schedule shifts on days off. The practice of volunteer firefighters started at their inception in 1736 and continues today. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) stated “about 69 percent of fire departments were staffed entirely by volunteer firefighters in 2012” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014c, para. 3).

Police officers do not have this same option for working part time or on a volunteer basis. Police officers work a standard full time shift. These can be 8 hour or 12 hour shifts. Officers are on duty at this time and do not typically have downtime to eat a meal or sleep while on duty. As the public must be provided protection around the clock, shift work is required (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014e).

In addition to different public perceptions and expectations, police officers and firefighters are required to complete training. Both departments are required to complete 20 hours of continuing education per year. Prospective firefighters are required to complete 468 hours for a basic certification (Texas Commission on Fire

Protection, n.d.). Most departments also require additional on the job training. These vary from one agency to the next.

In 1965, President Johnson established the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1966). President Johnson called for an increase and regulation of the professionalization of the police in the late 1960's and “made a substantial contribution to the professionalization of the police...[by]... recognizing the need for college-level instruction for police officers” (Hoover, Dowling & Bouley, 1996, p.19). In the late 1970's, the first group of college-trained police officers began to seek out leadership roles. A nationwide increase in police education programs led to the general public endorsing law enforcement as a legitimate professional career that requires a college degree and in turn, a commensurate salary. The public began to view “[f]irefighting, which does not require a college education...as a craft that does not merit the same salary scale as police work does” (Hoover, Dowling, & Bouley, 1996, p. 19). According to the Texas Commission of Law Enforcement, prospective police officers are required to complete 618 hours of training to qualify for a basic certification (Texas Commission of Law Enforcement, n.d.). Additionally, police officers are required to attend and pass a firearm qualification twice a year, both in daytime and nighttime.

Law enforcement is one of the most dangerous professions in the world. A nationwide report showed “police officers earn more than firefighters but they report lower job satisfaction and face more than twice the likelihood of dying on the job” (Strow, 2011, para. 3). Each year the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) compiles a special report on LEOKA or law enforcement officers killed and assaulted. The FBI

noted that approximately 520,047 police officers were employed in 2012. Ninety-five police officers were killed. Forty-eight police officers were killed feloniously and another 47 were killed accidentally. Felonious deaths resulted primarily from intentional gunshot or stabbings, while accidental deaths resulted from a car or motorcycle accident, a fall or accidental shooting (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2013).

Alternatively, there were more than double the number of firefighters employed in the United States in 2012, but there were fewer fatalities than police officers. This may be due to the fact that “2 out of 3 calls firefighters respond to are medical emergencies—not fires, according to the NFPA” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b, para. 3). The NFPA estimates that there were approximately 1,129,250 firefighters in the United States in 2012 (Haynes & Stein, 2014). There were 64 total firefighter deaths. Thirty-three percent of deaths resulted from exertion stress and medical emergencies, followed by rapid fire progress/explosions 31% (Fahy, LeBlanc, & Molis, 2014). In summary, police officers have a higher risk of fatality than firefighters.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Many people will argue for pay parity as both positions are those of public service. Frank J. Remington, a professor of law at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, presented an article at the 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the International Association of Chiefs of Police in Louisville, Kentucky. He recounted a story of a fire chief in a Midwestern city who was arguing for pay parity. Remington (1965) “argued that equality of pay is proper since both the police and firemen have the same interest and responsibility, namely, the safety of persons and property in the community” (p. 361). While his statement regarding interest and responsibility of both departments is

true, his motion was vetoed. The position of both agencies is to care for the citizens of the community, but their main objectives are different. Remington (1965) further discussed the differences and stated, “[w]hereas the decisions which firefighters are called upon to make are largely ones of physical science, the decisions which police must make are political, social, and psychological...” (p. 365).

In firefighting, the main objective is the prevention and extinguishing of fires. This is an important job involving personal danger. The position is mostly reactive, meaning firefighters are mostly active in serving their community when there actually is a fire to extinguish. In their downtime, they provide education to the community, service their vehicles, and complete additional training.

The main objective of a police officer is to enforce the law. This is done proactively as well as reactively. Police officers typically do not have down time as they are expected to be visible in the community to help deter crime, primarily by conducting criminal patrols. In the event a crime does occur, police officers react by enforcing the law, either by writing a ticket, apprehending a suspect, or completing an offense report.

While police officers have a higher rate of death, firefighters are at a higher risk for injuries. In 2012, the FBI collected assault data from 11,759 law enforcement agencies that employed 520, 047 officers. 52,901 officers reported injury. The rate of officer assaults was 10.2% (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2013).

According to the NFPA 1,129,250 firefighters were employed in the United States in 2012 (Karter & Molis, 2013). Approximately 69,400 firefighter injuries (or 16.3%) occurred in the line of duty in 2012. The leading type of injury received during fire ground operations was strain, sprain or muscular pain (55.2%), followed by wound, cut,

bleeding, bruises (12.2%) (Karter & Molis, 2013). Reported police injuries were assault via a personal weapon-arms, fists and feet, followed by injury due to knives or other cutting instruments (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2013).

It is clear that while firefighters report more injuries, police officers sustain more serious injuries. Additionally, police officers have a higher risk of fatality. These issues should all be taken into consideration when determining pay for each department and each departments pay should be determined independent of each other.

While both positions primary goal is to serve and protect the community, they are in no means the same job. It would be comparing a nurse to a veterinary technician. Both wear scrubs and both save lives, but have different training and level of skill and risk associated with each position.

This is especially true in the case of the police detective/investigator and fire inspector/investigator. They are seen to have similar positions in terms of investigation duties. Both detective and inspector may start as a police officer, and “[m]ost fire inspectors and investigators are required to have work experience in a related occupation, such as firefighters or police officers” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014d, para. 5).

According to the Texas Administrative Code, Basic Arson Investigators must “possess a current basic peace officer’s license from the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement or documentation that the individual is a federal law enforcement officer” (“Minimum Standards for Advanced Arson Investigator,” 2000, para. 1). They must also “possess valid documentation of accreditation from the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress as a Fire Investigator; or complete a commission approved

basic fire investigation training program and successfully pass the commission examination as specified in Chapter 439 of this title” (“Minimum Standards for Advanced Arson Investigator,” 2000, para 3-4). Additionally, “[s]ome fire departments or law enforcement agencies require investigators to have a certain number of years within the organization or to be a certain rank, such as lieutenant or captain, before they are eligible for promotion to an inspector or investigator position” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014d, para. 5).

In terms of police detectives, “[they] normally begin their career as police officers before being promoted to detective” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014e, para. 8). In terms of similarities in position, fire inspectors hold a preventative position. Their primary position is to perform inspections. The fire investigator, in some states known as an arson investigator, determines the origin and cause of a fire. Alternatively, police detectives gather facts and evidence for cases. These cases may range from thefts, kidnapping, drug deals, and murder to name a few.

A 2012 report by the FBI showed nationwide “there were 18.7 arson offenses for every 100,000 inhabitants” (Arson, 2013, Overview section, para. 6), while “the rate of property crime was estimated at 2,859.2 per 100,000 inhabitants” (Property Crime, 2012, Overview section, para. 2). The occurrence of an arson investigation is substantially lower than any other investigation a police detective performs. The arson investigators case load is significantly less than that of a police investigator. Though similarities do exist in the job duties, qualifications, and certifications of police and arson investigators, it has been demonstrated the police investigator performs his duties much

more frequently. This demands a police investigator perform at a higher level to manage his case load.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Pay parity between police officer and firefighters should not exist. By having a separation of the two departments, each department will benefit. The currently employed personnel will receive a more competitive salary and benefits and can be competitive when hiring prospective candidates.

Strow (2011), an associate professor of economics and the BBandT Professor for the Study of Capitalism at Western Kentucky University noted, “parity can be harmful to police officers as firefighters are overpaid in relation to police officers in the cities that mandate pay parity” (para. 4). This can lead to a surge in prospective firefighters and a decrease in police officers who look for higher paying positions with better benefits in cities that do not have pay parity. Strow (2011) noted the issue in cities that mandate pay parity “is exacerbated by the fact that there are a higher number of promotable positions in a typical fire department as compared to a typical police department. As a result, average firefighter pay is even higher than police officer pay...” (para. 4).

In summary, police officers and firefighters have vastly different job requirements, not only in terms of training and education, but also in terms of risks. When there is no parity in pay between police and fire departments, it allows city law makers to fund higher wages and benefits for the police department. Higher wages and better benefits will allow police administrators to be competitive in the recruitment of perspective employees, retention of current employees, and to maintain a high quality of police work in their community through job satisfaction.

The budgetary process for a municipality is very competitive regarding funding between city administration, public works, police department and fire departments. If the police administrator can acquire more funding for his agency, he can be competitive with other area agencies hiring the best qualified officers through higher salaries and better benefits. This benefits the citizens as each department can hire the best candidate, thus improving service to the public. It is in the best interest not only for police officers and firefighters, but also for citizens, that pay parity no longer exists.

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