



By DENNIS L. RUBIN

Atlanta Fire Rescue Cadet Program: Our Path to the Future

Program Targets Students Interested in Becoming Career Firefighters

One of the many descriptions of Atlanta, GA, is “Resurgence City.” Atlanta has often faced near-overwhelming odds, but without fail, its citizens have rebuilt from the ashes, as is so vividly portrayed by the city’s symbol of the legendary “Phoenix.” Atlanta continues to rise to the challenges put before it and always will. One modern-day epic challenge/opportunity involves education and career opportunities for Atlanta’s greatest resource, its youth. This column will examine the role that Atlanta Fire Rescue plays in being a part of this major community-based initiative.

When Mayor Shirley Franklin took office, she presented a simple, straightforward, but powerful and effective turnaround plan for our city. This platform plank that illuminated a safer city was the top reason that led me to want to be a part of her cabinet. The second element of Mayor Franklin’s plan is the initiative to improve education for our youth. The vehicle for achieving this goal is a program titled “Next Steps.”

In the first year that Atlanta Fire Rescue became involved in “Next Steps,” we hired seven high school seniors and distributed them throughout the department at various division assignments. Unfortunately, this was done without



A cadet becomes familiar with the Tool/Equipment Carry portion of the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT).

much thought or discussion. Providing jobs and work experience seemed like the right way to support the mayor’s award-winning “Next Steps” program, but at the end of the school year, there was no direct result that impacted the department. It was at this point that the Fire Cadet Program idea was formulated and refined.

Focus On Career Opportunities

Historically, Atlanta Fire Rescue has had difficulty filling entry-level firefighter positions. When I took over as fire chief in late 2003, the department had more than 150 vacancies, which was very costly in overtime payments. In addition, the vacancies hampered external training, shift work, vacation slots and providing backup fire apparatus operators, since each shift was short by more than 50 members. As part of a very aggressive recruitment campaign in conjunction with the “Next Steps” program, our Fire Cadet Program was developed.

Rather than hiring high school students and attempting to place them in various divisions and sections of the department, hoping for a fit between the part-time workers and organizational needs, we took a different approach. The well-thought-out plan called for a recruitment program in each of Atlanta’s 10 public high school districts. This

time, we would attempt to hire young people interested in becoming career firefighters, preferably in our city. We developed a detailed handbook describing the requirements, prerequisites and responsibilities of an Atlanta Fire Rescue cadet. We were very fortunate to have Captain Sylvia Gardner (now retired) and Firefighter Melodie Moss manage the program. Captain Gardner supervised and coordinated the program and Firefighter Moss was the program’s full-time commander. After three years of hard work and effort by many people, the program has paid wonderful dividends with a great return on our investment.

During the summer and early fall, two high school seniors are identified for our program from each Atlanta public high school. The seniors must meet our requirements for selection as sworn firefighters in our department, which involves an extensive process. Once the young people express an interest, the months of September, October and November are spent getting them tested, qualified and on the payroll.

Among the many steps to become a recruit/cadet firefighter for Atlanta is a comprehensive background check, completion of the International Association of Fire Fighters/ International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFF/IAFC) Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT), psychological testing, police record review, fingerprinting, entrance examination and personal history. Cadets must be recommended by school guidance counselors and pass a final oral interview conducted by the department. Once all of the steps are completed, a provisional offer of employment is made contingent on successful completion of a medical examination based on National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard 1582.

It’s then that we test each student’s level of commitment, long before they put on our uniform. The structured schedule from this point consists of four hours in school (mornings) in which the recruits receive the required academic courses. After lunch,

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CHIEF CONCERNS <<<

Atlanta Fire Rescue



Program Coordinator Firefighter Melodie Moss, seated at center, with members of Cadet Class 2006-1.

Cadet Renaldo Watts positions and prepares large-diameter hose for reloading following fires involving several vehicles in a salvage yard.



Byron Kennedy/Atlanta Fire Rescue

four hours in the afternoon are dedicated to on-the-job work experience. For one entire month, the cadets report to our training academy to learn the basic skills of the job. The emphasis of this 80-hour training course is safety, safety and more safety.

Each cadet is assigned to a fire station to ride along with our companies. However, the cadets never enter a hazard zone. Emergency-scene operations focus on assisting the fire apparatus operator or being directly supervised by the company officer. The core principle of this program is to prepare a high school senior to transition to becoming a career Atlanta firefighter.

How do we pay for this program? One of our key Fire Cadet Program partners is the Atlanta Workforce Development Authority (AWDA). Executive Director Deborah Lum has assisted us in securing federal funding to pay for student salaries. While learning job skills, each student is paid \$280 biweekly. Atlanta Fire Rescue pays for each cadet to receive a set of rented

turnout gear that meets all standards and codes. A few years ago, we conducted a cost analysis and determined that renting turnout gear for all trainees – cadets and adult recruits – works best for our department. Wear and tear on training equipment is extensive and expensive, so when a person becomes a “sworn-in” member (completing all entry and training requirements, which takes about six months), a new set of turnouts is waiting.

Next, we are very fortunate to have

Workrite Uniform Company of Oxnard, CA, as a Fire Cadet Program partner. Workrite provides uniforms for the cadets at no cost to our city. “Workrite Uniform is honored to support preparing our heroes of tomorrow, through donating station wear to the Cadet Firefighter Program,” said Glenn K. Sato of Workrite.

The last major cost involves the transportation needs of our cadets. Atlanta is fortunate to have a solid public transportation system, MARTA. Cadets are issued “MARTA Pass” cards that provides public transportation throughout the city for the length of the program.

A great bond has been forged among fire stations, schools and neighborhoods. One night, I responded to a second-alarm warehouse fire. As I walked to the command post, I noticed that a cadet was assisting Engine 7’s fire apparatus operator. Since it was about 9 o’clock on a school night, I was thinking that the cadet should have been at home. When I saw the captain of Engine 7, I asked why the cadet was still at work. His response was interesting as well as gratifying. Because of his home situation, the cadet spends a lot of time at the station and in fact was “adopted” by the fire station members. It was at this point that I understood the power that the mayor’s “Next Steps” program held. Our members (as always) were making a true commitment to better the communities in Atlanta.

Over the past few years, our department has closed the gap and filled vacant firefighter positions. Still, as one may imagine, openings within Atlanta Fire Rescue are cyclical, with about 30 to 50 retirements accruing per year, making recruitment a very important function. The Fire Cadet Program represents about 20 new potential employees each year. The program provides a great organizational opportunity to have a lot of quality (discretionary) time to conduct employee “compatibility testing” with each cadet (new potential full-time employees). I would even say that Atlanta Fire Rescue has developed one of the best “Next Steps” programs in the city government.

We believe this is a “best practice” to be shared among other fire-rescue agencies, so Firefighter Moss has agreed to share electronic copies of our department’s “Cadet Guidelines” and other program resources by contacting her at MMoss@atlantaga.gov.

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