

New Bedford Fire Chief Paul Coderre issues statement regarding Fire Department 'blackout' policy

New Bedford Fire Chief Paul Coderre, Jr. issued the following statement today regarding the Fire Department's so-called 'rolling blackout' policy:

"Beginning in March 2020, the New Bedford Fire Department (NBFD) will end so-called fire company 'rolling blackouts,' the practice of taking one of the City's ten fire companies out of service on a rotating daily basis.

The City's ongoing financial pressures have required the NBFD to adopt variations of a blackout policy on a regular basis since 2009, including the expansion of the policy in January 2016 as federal SAFER grant funding ended. At its peak the SAFER grant funded 70 positions, or about one-third of the entire Fire Department. Like New Bedford, blackouts have been employed by other municipalities as a way of recalibrating spending in the wake of the last recession.

In light of fiscal pressures on the City and concerns expressed by the New Bedford Fire Fighters Association, Mayor Jon Mitchell tasked the current NBFD leadership last year with evaluating the current blackout policy and exploring alternatives that would allow the NBFD to maintain necessary response levels with existing financial resources. After careful evaluation, the NBFD leadership has determined that although the use of blackouts has not compromised the department's responsiveness, the practice has resulted in certain negative consequences.

First, the use of blackouts has proven to be administratively

cumbersome. The blackout policy requires time and resources to administer. The deactivation of fire companies on a rotating basis requires staff to devote significant time and attention to managing the daily re-assignment of personnel. The time consumed by staff administering the blackout policy could be much better spent focusing on training, fire prevention, and other important functions.

Second, the practice generates Fire Department overtime costs to the City. The projected Nbfd overtime deficit for the current fiscal year is approximately \$800,000.

Third, the blackouts have undermined firefighter morale. Under the blackout policy, firefighters and officers are regularly re-assigned to other companies based in other stations. This creates a hassle for firefighters, as they may be required from time to time to transport personal gear from their assigned station.

Ending the blackouts by fulling funding ten fire companies was considered, but was determined to be financially unrealistic. The City's Office of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) has estimated that funding an additional company would cost the city \$2.7 million annually. Appropriating an additional \$2.7 million from the City's General Fund every year is well beyond the City's financial means.

Therefore, Nbfd leadership has recommended that in order to maintain adequate fire coverage, and end the practice of blackouts, the Nbfd will decommission Engine #11, which is housed at 754 Brock Avenue in the City's South End. Engine #11 will be placed in reserve status. No layoffs will result from this change; firefighters and officers currently assigned to Engine #11 will be redeployed to other fire companies based on existing personnel protocols.

The Nbfd has determined that the response level along the Brock Avenue corridor area will not vary materially from the

current level because the response area of Engine #6 (based at 151 Purchase Street) significantly overlaps the response area of Engine #11. Moreover, the scheduled opening of the South End Public Safety Center on Brock Avenue in the Spring of 2021 will shift further south the location of both Engine #6 and Ladder #3.

With the discontinuance of blackouts, the Department has estimated a reduction in OT spending next fiscal year (FY2021) of as much as \$400,000-500,000.

In addition, the reassignment process will allow the Nbfd Fire Prevention Unit to expand by two positions. The strengthening of Fire Prevention reflects the Department's renewed emphasis on using preventative measures to proactively reduce fire risk and improve public safety."

-New Bedford Fire Chief Paul Coderre, Jr.