

# **Sacramento Fire Agencies**

## **“Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire”**

### **Issue**

Some employees of the Sacramento Fire Department (Sac Fire) and the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire Department (Metro) have received salary enhancements by claiming college degrees from unaccredited providers (i.e., *diploma mills*.) What can be done to ensure that firefighters taking courses for higher pay are doing so from accredited and approved higher education providers?

### **Reason for Investigation**

Complaints received by the Grand Jury alleged that Sacramento's two fire departments were misusing public funds by granting pay increases to employees based upon education credits granted by unaccredited or unapproved course providers.

### **Method of Investigation**

The Grand Jury interviewed the chiefs and senior managers of both Sac Fire and Metro departments and the Labor Relations Director for the City of Sacramento. Labor agreements (Sacramento Area Fire Fighters Local 522) that provide for incentive pay for uniformed employees and managers were reviewed along with various correspondence and memoranda.

### **Background and Facts**

Sac Fire, with 650 employees, provides fire protection and emergency response services to the public within the boundaries of the City of Sacramento. Metro, with 750 employees, provides fire protection and emergency response to the public within the 417 square miles of Sacramento County not covered by Sac Fire or other local fire departments, such as Galt, Wilton or Folsom.

It has been the practice of firefighters in both departments to pursue pay incentives provided by their labor agreements, and, given their flexible work schedules, they primarily enroll in on-line college courses. Because the internet is an open environment, many educational providers have questionable resources or qualifications. These so-called *diploma mills* require very little effort to complete a degree and provide credits that are often not transferable to legitimate institutions.

Historically, the incentive provision of the labor agreement was not specific as to what constituted accreditation for on-line education providers, and many firefighters in both departments took advantage of this apparent loophole. Nineteen members of Sac Fire (including six fire captains) and five members of Metro applied for and received salary increases using bachelor's degrees from unaccredited *diploma mills*.

When senior Sac Fire officials became aware of this practice, they sought \$50,000 reimbursement from the affected firefighters. Because the incentive pay provision in the labor agreement was considered unclear, Sac Fire agreed to change the labor agreement provision in question without seeking reimbursement or discipline.

In 2007 the Metro Fire Chief was made aware of educational abuses within his department and took more direct action. Upon a review of the personnel records for all staff, it was determined that five staff had received salary enhancements based upon degrees from unaccredited providers. A *side-bar* letter was added to the Local 522 labor agreement delineating criteria for determining accredited on-line educational courses; that is, from institutions approved and sanctioned by agencies delegated authority by the United States Department of Education and the California Post Secondary Education Commission to accredit on-line institutions. The five Metro firefighters were given written reprimands, docked 410 hours (51 work days) of vacation time, ordered to make reparation of \$20,314 (including 7% interest) and precluded from accruing overtime for one calendar year. The assistant fire chief who approved the salary enhancement requests received a written reprimand.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

**Finding 1:** Firefighters in both Sac Fire and Metro departments took advantage of a poorly developed and poorly administered policy of providing salary enhancement for college degrees without regard to the source or quality of the education provider.

**Recommendation 1:** None. Steps have been taken by both departments to more clearly define and ensure accreditation compliance.

**Finding 2:** Management of both departments were remiss in approving requests for incentive pay without verifying that they were complying with the spirit if not the letter of the appropriate policy.

**Recommendation 2:** Leaders in both departments should be reminded that they are guardians of the public trust and that it is their responsibility to ensuring that public funds are spent in a cost-effective and appropriate manner.

## **Response Requirements**

**Penal Code sections 933 and 933.5 require that specific responses to both the findings and recommendations contained in this report be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Sacramento Superior Court by October 1, 2009 from:**

- **Sacramento Fire Department**
  
- **Metro Fire Department**