

CITY OF SACRAMENTO FIRE DEPARTMENT HANDLING OF NARCOTICS

SUMMARY

The Sacramento County 2014-2015 Grand Jury investigated the Sacramento Fire Department's handling of narcotics carried in the course of their duties and found that there are necessary safeguards against the inappropriate and illicit use of narcotics by Department personnel. The Grand Jury did not find any evidence of narcotic misuse in their investigation. The Department should continue to implement the City Auditor's recommendations.

BACKGROUND

In August 2014 the Office of the City Auditor released a report, *Audit of the Fire Department Inventory System and Narcotics*, critical of the Department's handling and inventory controls for narcotics administered by City paramedics. The Auditor's investigation was triggered by an anonymous tip concerning missing vials of morphine, similar to 2008 charges of narcotic abuse levied against fire personnel.

The City Auditor's report determined that the allegation of a large number of missing drugs was the result of sloppy record keeping rather than nefarious abuse or pilfering, as widely reported in the media. The Auditor made numerous recommendations to strengthen the Fire Department's policies and procedures related to purchasing, inventory, and distribution of narcotics and accounting of drugs administered by paramedics in the field.

Based on information received by the Grand Jury, an investigation was conducted to determine the adequacy of the Fire Department's policies and procedures to prevent the illegal use of narcotics by paramedics or other Fire Department personnel, a related issue not investigated by the City Auditor.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation was conducted over a period of several months which consisted of a review of various documents, including the *Audit of the Fire Department Inventory System and Narcotics*. The Grand Jury also heard testimony from senior Fire Department management and the City Auditor.

DISCUSSION

In response to findings by the City Auditor, the City of Sacramento Fire Department purchased and began implementation of a computerized order, inventory and tracking system for narcotic drugs carried on fire apparatus and rescue vehicles. Concurrent with systems implementation, internal policies and procedures were adopted and training was conducted to orient users with system functionality and operational requirements.

The new management system replaces unreliable paper processes that led to narcotic inventory discrepancies and installs greater security access to restricted drugs.

Nationally, the abuse or theft of narcotic drugs carried on fire apparatus and rescue vehicles is a well-documented but relatively rare occurrence. Typical abuse involves either outright theft of narcotics from supplies either carried on the fire apparatus or from warehoused supplies.

A more insidious abuse involves using a hypodermic to withdraw a portion of the narcotic, transferring it to another vial, and then replacing the stolen amount of narcotic with an equal amount of safe saline solution. The result is a visually intact and full vial of narcotic whose potency has been greatly diminished.

Given the negative impact that these abuses can have for patients suffering traumatic injuries, it is paramount that stringent safeguards be in place to ensure that drugs are undiluted and administered by drug-free personnel.

FINDINGS

The Grand Jury, based on the testimony and review of policies and procedures put in place or in process of implementation, determined that:

- F1. The Fire Department's implementation of new computerized systems to replace manual inventory and tracking systems will greatly increase the accuracy and timeliness of information related to the purchase, storage, distribution and use of narcotics.
- F2. The Department's implementation of coded access by authorized personnel provides better assurance that narcotics are only accessed by those with the proper and unique access codes, as referenced by the City Auditor's report.
- F3. No evidence was discovered to indicate drug theft or tampering.
- F4. The Department's publically stated willingness to consider random drug testing, as stated in the City Auditor's report, is recognition of a proven program to create a safer work environment for fire personnel and to ensure better patient care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The City of Sacramento Fire Department should continue implementing the City Auditor's recommendations.
- R1. The City Auditor should conduct a follow-up audit to determine the adequacy of the Fire Department's implementation and operation of the systems, policies and procedures required to properly manage narcotics under the Department's control.
- R3. In consultation with the City Attorney, the Fire Department should diligently pursue discussions with firefighter union representatives to institute a random drug testing program.

RESPONSES

Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05 require that the following officials submit specific responses to the findings and recommendations in this report to the Presiding Judge of the Sacramento County Superior Court by October 1, 2015:

- The City of Sacramento Fire Department Chief - all Findings and all Recommendations

Mail or hand-deliver a hard copy of the response to:

Robert C. Hight, Presiding Judge
Sacramento County Superior Court
720 9th Street, Department 47
Sacramento, California 95814

In addition, email the response to:

Becky Castaneda, Grand Jury Coordinator at castanb@saccourt.com