

ALEXANDRIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF TUESDAY, JUNE 15, 2021
7:00 p.m.
VIRTUAL (Zoom)

Members Present

Danielle Beach
Lisl Brunner, Vice Chair
Janeka Cogdell
Kevin Edwards, Vice Chair
Lynette Foster
Chris Harris
Matt Harris, Chair
Katherine Lloyd
Elizabeth "PJ" Palmer Johnson
David Rigsby
Scott Schwartz

Staff Present

David Miller, Investigator
Miladis Martinez Gutierrez

Members Not Excused

Michelle Cho

Members Excused

Susan Kellom

Guests

Fire Chief, Corey Smedley
Fire Department Public Information Officer, Rativia Evans

1. Call to Order/Introductions by Chair, Matt Harris

Chair Harris called the meeting to order at 7:01 p.m. Introductions were made. Chair Harris welcomed special guest Fire Chief, Corey Smedley.

2. Approval of April Minutes

Upon a motion by Commissioner Schwartz, seconded by Commissioner Palmer Johnson, the Commission approved the minutes of the May meeting. All Commissioners present voted aye with one abstention.

3. Fire Chief Corey Smedley

Chair Harris welcomed and introduced Fire Chief Corey Smedley. Fire Chief Corey Smedley thanked the Commission for the invitation and said that he wants to always continue to strive to improve on his relationship building, especially with this Commission.

Fire Chief Smedley gave a brief background of himself and said that he started in the fire service 27 years ago in Prince George's County. He said that he retired from there in November 2015 and started working with the City of Alexandria in December 2015. Fire Chief Smedley stated that he came in as the Deputy Chief of Emergency Management and was promoted to the Assistant Chief, he added that it will be two years since he became the Fire and EMS Chief.

Fire Chief Smedley talked about the Fire and EMS Department demographics and stated that the department is composed of 320 sworn and civilian employees, and 280 to 290 are first responders, these are Paramedics and Fire Fighters. He said that the Department was founded in 1774 and that they have about 40 different position classifications in the fire department. He reported on their annual call volume for FY 2019, FY 2020, and FY 2022, and added that currently, this year they are just under 22,000 calls.

Fire Chief Smedley state that the way they do business in the fire service in this region, and especially in Northern Virginia is that they do not look at boundaries. He stated that the calls originating from Alexandria resources are about just under 17,000. He also reported that there are about 4, 500 calls into other jurisdictions, and said that about a third of their calls are either of them going into someone else's jurisdiction or someone else coming into our jurisdiction.

Fire Chief Smedley reported that his budget is a little over 55 million but is actually a little bit more than that with their capital improvement projects, but that 88% of their budget is personnel. He also talked about their recruitment efforts and said that in calendar year 2018 the applicants went from 800 to 513 in calendar year 2019 and to 711 in calendar year 2020. He stated that they hired 34 applicants in calendar year 2018; 15 were hired in calendar year 2019 and said that they are going through a process of selecting all of the potential candidates for a class that is expected to take place in either August or September, and he is looking to hire about 25 people. He added that many of these applicants are in multiple processes right now.

Fire Chief Smedley also talked about recruit schools' demographics and reported that since he has been the Fire Chief, he has had the pleasure of hiring for three recruit schools. He reported that in recruit school 49 they had 26 people, 22 were male, and 4 were female. In recruit school 50, they also hired 8 more people, 7 males and 1 female and that was through the Safer grant to increase their staffing, so that they can meet the national standards to have full personnel on every large apparatus. He reported that in 2020, during recruit school 51, there were 16 people, 15 Males and one female; the female resigned four days into the recruit school and went to Fairfax County. He stated that there are six to seven different pieces of the process and said that when a female gets through all the process somebody is going to hire her.

Fire Chief Smedley added that they are trying to make sure that they are an inclusive Department across the fire service, especially in the National Capital Region. He added that potential employees are drawn to a department depending on the benefit to them, whether it is more pay, more opportunities, working less hours or whether it is closer to where they live. The culture of the Department is another reason why an employee will stay. He also stated that the last piece of the process has to do with things that the department pays for, such as the polygraphs, psychological evaluations, medical and physical examinations, so when they get to those points, there is a really good chance for candidates to get hired, and it depends on how fast they are able to process them through their partners and vendors and get them through the process, so that they can get them hired. He mentioned that the Academy classes are about six months.

Fire Chief Smedley stated that everyone is trying to diversify their organization, so it just depends on if the Alexandria Fire Department is their choice versus another agency. He stated in the last class, they only had one female, but they had more that passed the process, but they just chose to not accept the job and went to other jurisdictions. He stated that he will provide the Commission with some information regarding the percentage of female applicants and the information of female applicants that were hired.

Fire Chief Smedley reported that there are 301 member of the Alexandria Fire Department and said that 249 are males (15 civilian employees), 52 females (8 civilian employees). He also provided a demographic break down by race and gender and said that he realized that they have more work to do to

improve the diversity across the entire department, not only on their sworn, but also on their civilian side. He stated that historically, the fire services have been male dominated on the firefighter side and female dominated on the paramedic side.

Fire Chief Smedley reported that since January of 2020, 34 people have left the Fire Department for various reasons and said that this is more than 10% of the department that has left since January of last year. He stated that it is a significant challenge for the department, not only because it takes them six to eight months to recruit on the sworn side, and on the civilian side, it can take between six weeks to four months. He also mentioned that since 2016, 80 people have separated from the Department for various reason. He also stated that he is engaging the City Manager's Office to lay out what the specifics are to that, and what that means and what they need to do to expeditiously address this, but that is work in progress.

Fire Chief Smedley also mentioned the organizational assessment that was done for the department in 2018. He stated that the City conducted a City-wide employee engagement survey and based on the comments at that time, the City Manager commissioned a consultant to come in and do an organizational assessment. He stated that, that organizational assessment started shortly after he took over the Fire Department. He added that 50% of the department has been interviewed and out of that engagement the City Manager provided a draft report to leadership, and then additional comments were provided to draft report. He stated that in June 2020 a final report was completed and in that final report there were a couple of things that resonated such as a perception of individualism and the need of improving their communication. Fire Chief Smedley will provide a copy of the Organizational Assessment for the Fire Department final report to Mr. David Miller, so that he can send it to the commission.

Fire Chief Smedley addressed questions from the Commission regarding data for female applicants and the disparity of the number of the female applicants that make it through the process. He stated that he did not have that information with him, but that historically they see anywhere between 15% to 25% of the applicants are females. He stated that he will provide information on that data and also a breakdown by race to Mr. Miller to be distributed to the Commission. Fire Chief Smedley stated that one of the most challenging parts of the process is the candidate physical agility test, which is call (CPAT), and that is a really physical demanding part of the process, the irony is that when looking at the ratio of how many males apply to how many females apply, females actually have a higher percentage of passing it then the ratio of males that applied. Once a female applicant finishes any agencies process, they can choose wherever they want to go, and they will get hired.

Chief Smedley also addressed inquiries about whether any of the employees that left cited leadership as an issue for why they were leaving. Fire Chief Smedley stated that some have talked about the culture of the department. He also mentioned that in 2014 they went to all hazards approach and said that before they were hiring civilian paramedics, civilian training and support staff and sworn firefighters. The All Hazard's approach means that the sworn side was only hiring sworn first responders so, they could be a firefighter, firefighter with a basic emergency medical technician certification or firefighter with a paramedic certification and they no longer hired single-role medics. He added that for those that left in 2019, he has not heard, in any of the exit interviews, that they had left because of leadership. He

added that people have left because of culture, they do not feel that they have opportunities in the Department.

Chief Smedley addressed questions regarding applicants having the option to go to other jurisdiction in the middle of their training and if there is a preference on hiring people that live in Alexandria or if they hire from the total DMV area. He stated that they do not have a hiring preference, in general when hiring. He also added that people can take the offer of employment that they have provided to them, and they can go wherever they want to. He stated again that people leave for various reasons, such as higher pay or less hours of work at week. He stated that the in the Alexandria Fire Department they work 56 hours a week; Loudoun County works 48 hours a week; Arlington County is moving forward to 48 hours a week; Washington DC and Prince George's County work 42 hours a week, so when looking at working less hours for roughly the same pay, people want more of their time. He stated that the issue with the Alexandria Fire Department is the pay, the benefits, and the number of hours that they have to work.

Fire Chief Smedley also addressed questions about taking demographic information on the LGBTQ hires or applicants, and seeking applicants by attending LGBTQ community events. Fire Chief Smedley stated that he did not have that data, and said that he has not seen that kind of data come to him about LGBTQ and added that they have a Fire Captain who used to be the Union President and she is the representative for the LGBTQ Task Force and said that they work with different organizations to ensure that they are providing these opportunities and building relationships, so that they can ensure that they are not leaving anyone out who would want to come and practice this profession. He also addressed the questions about whether the Fire Department is accredited by any agency, and said that they are not accredited, but that they just became a registered agency with the Center for Public Safety Excellence. He also added that a couple of months ago, they entered into a contract with Lexipol, Lexipol provides public safety policy development, and said that he has purchased the policy development solution platform. He stated that Lexipol is helping them go through each and every policy that they have to make sure that they are up to date and where they do not have a policies and procedures in place, Lexipol is helping them create them.

Fire Chief Smedley address the question about if all of the personnel are required to pass the same physical tests, and stated that that all the candidates have to go through the same physical agility test and said that every year they have an annual medical physical and a work performance annual test where everyone has to go through it. He also addressed a question if the leadership positions within the department are demographically reflective of the entire core of the fire employees and said that it is work in progress. He gave a breakdown of the leadership by saying the there is one Chief, there are two Assistant Chiefs, both of them are white males, there are five positions for Deputy Chiefs, but only three are filled, two of them are white male and one is black male. There are ten battalion Chiefs, six are white male, three black male and one Hispanic male. He added that he was recently able to promote a female Captain and he is about to promote a female Lieutenant, effective July 10th. He stated that he is trying additional ways to improve the gender diversity in the Department.

Chair Harris thanked Fire Chief Corey Smedley for his presentation.

4. Executive Committee /Upcoming Meetings

Chair Harris stated that the Executive Committee met last Monday.

AAPI Heritage Month Town Hall, NVCC Panel

Chair Harris stated that Asian American Pacific Islander event on May 27th was fantastic and said that it was recorded.

Progress Pride Flags on Market Square

Chair Harris informed that progress pride flags that were displayed on Market Square recently were vandalized on June 6. Investigator Miller reported that the flags were not damaged and they have been since put back up.

Rainbow Crosswalk letter

Chair Harris stated that the rainbow crosswalk letter still has not been acted on, or at least there has not been any new news.

Chair Harris also reported that Police Chief Michael Brown is stepping down for personal reasons. He also reported that the Virginia Association for Human Rights met early this month via Zoom. He stated that the Executive Committee talked about staff appreciation event, and they are thinking having a happy hour at their first in person meeting.

5. Presentation of Slate of Officers for Elections

Commissioner Beach presented the slate of continuing with the current officers in place, current Chair Matt Harris and the two Vice Chairs, Lisl Brunner and Kevin Edwards. Commissioner Beach asked if there were any nominations from the floor. Upon a motion by Commissioner Palmer Johnson, seconded by Commissioner Foster the slate was accepted as presented. All Commissioners present voted aye. Chair Harris stated that Commissioner Rigsby and Commissioner Palmer Johnson are appointed by the Chair.

6. Old and New Business - No old and new business report.

7. Liaison Reports

Commissioner Lloyd reported that the Alexandria Commission on Person with Disabilities had a guest speaker, Vicki Caudullo, who is in charge of the City of Alexandria Dockless Mobility Program, so the scooters that are all around old town. Commissioner Lloyd stated that Ms. Caudullo gave a really good report on basically brainstorming ideas for improving etiquette and the ACPD Commission is very concerned with the way that people operate the scooters.

Commissioner Foster reported that their Commission meeting was last Thursday, and they had Sergeant Torrance from the Police Department, who presented a report on crime in the city. She added that they had guest speaker Delegate Charniele Herring, she is the Chair of the House Democratic Caucus and she gave them an update on current bills that have either passed or are up for vote.

Commissioner Palmer Johnson reported that the new officers for the Commission for women are Ann Harbour, Chair, President; Diana Karczmarczyk, First Vice and Shelley Brown, Second Vice Chair. Commissioner Palmer Johnson also reported that their guest speaker was Jacqueline Tucker.

8. Announcements /Adjournment

There were no announcements.

MOTION: adjourn the meeting.

Palmer Johnson /Schwartz **PASSED** unanimously

The meeting adjourned at 8:45p.m.