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New policy frees firefighters from riding in parades

Change mandates use of volunteers

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SAN DIEGO – Controversy over a Hillcrest fire crew being ordered to take part in the July gay pride parade has prompted the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department to issue a new policy of relying on volunteers.

An on-duty engine crew will no longer be required to drive a firetruck in local parades if no volunteers step forward, a department spokesman said.

Under a policy revision worked out between Fire Chief Tracy Jarman and San Diego Firefighters Local 145 over the past two days, an unpaid volunteer engineer would first be sought to drive the truck. That failing, a volunteer would be paid four hours' overtime.

The department takes part in 14 community parades each year, including the pride celebration, Fourth of July, St. Patrick's Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Cesar Chavez Day.

Fire Capt. John Ghiotto, Engineer Jason Hewett and firefighters Chad Allison and Alex Kane filed a complaint with the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing on Aug. 1, seeking the right to sue the fire department for sexual harassment. The crew said they were ordered to drive the July 21 gay pride parade route, where they were hit with sexual comments and gestures from men in the crowd.

Their lawyer, Charles LiMandri, west coast director of the Thomas More Law Center, said yesterday that the wording of the new policy may not go far enough.

"It's a step in the right direction," LiMandri said, "but it doesn't say clearly that no one will be ordered to participate. I'm not persuaded that it solves the problem."

Fire department spokesman Maurice Luque said it was unrealistic to worry about a lack of volunteers.

"Someone is going to step up and want four hours of overtime," he said. "We're not going to order anyone to participate. We wanted to rewrite the policy, trying to correct a problem."

Luque said the revised policy went into immediate effect yesterday.

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