

LAFD and COVID-19: The Importance of Staffing During a Pandemic

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11 October 2024

Interview Discussion

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Operations, Retired

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Link to video: <https://youtu.be/mFZfR-YG5Yo>

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 greatly impacted the United States, particularly the healthcare field and the fire service. This research paper is driven by the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the Los Angeles Fire Department, which faced a staffing crisis that still impacts it to date. It was found that staffing issues before COVID-19 and the sudden loss of a large amount of manpower during the pandemic created a disproportionate burden upon the Department and its members.

Introduction

When looking back upon the outbreak of COVID-19 and the following years, it is clear that no government agency was prepared for a pandemic of its size. Misinformation abounded while government agencies struggled to adapt to ever-changing information on the virus. Representing a population of 3,822,238 in 2022 (*Los Angeles Demographics 2022-2023*), the Los Angeles City Fire Department was faced with a task that would define all Fire Departments in major cities: to provide good patient care against a virus that was infecting the EMS responders themselves. What resulted was a staffing crisis that led to dramatic increases in overtime and mass layoffs over the vaccination. This research paper encompasses an innumerable amount of topics and information; it therefore will focus on the Los Angeles Fire Department's staffing issues and the effects of overtime on its employees and cost.

Background and Significance

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how crucial manpower is for the Los Angeles Fire Department. More specifically, the pandemic created a situation where hundreds of personnel were sick, while more were fired for refusing the COVID-19 vaccination; this in turn put a massive burden on the firefighters who were healthy and able to work, which resulted in burnout and worsening mental health. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the events before the outbreak of the pandemic, what happened during it, and what should be done in the future. To formulate a better strategy for the next pandemic, this paper sets out with several questions:

1. Were there events before the outbreak that made the Los Angeles Fire Department vulnerable?
2. What exactly happened during the opening years of the pandemic?
3. What can be learned from the past and applied to the future?

Analyzing the past will help develop a plan for the future that will minimize the staffing issues that occurred.

Literature Review

Lit Review: Pre-COVID 19

The future is often shaped by decisions made in the past, and so it is prudent to assess the staffing issues that the Los Angeles Fire Department faced leading up to the pandemic. Speaking to Fox News during the height of the pandemic, Freddy Escobar, president of the United Firefighters of LA City Union said, “back in 2007, the fire department was decimated. We removed 318 positions, [and] didn't hire one individual for five years... I came on in May of 1989, we were averaging 500 calls a day.” He continued, “Today, we average approximately 2,000 calls a day and we have fewer fire stations and fewer members today than we did 33-plus years ago.” (Silva, *LA has outgrown its Fire Department': LAFD's 4K personnel struggle to serve population of 4m* 2023). In a 2016 letter to then LA City Mayor Eric Garcetti, the Sylmar Neighborhood Council declared a state of emergency related to LAFD resources allocated to their community. Their letter discusses city budget cuts in 2011 and subsequent cut of, “The LAFD’s annual budget by \$88 million - from \$561 million in 2008 to \$473 billion” This letter goes on to state that, “as of July, 2015, LAFD projected 340 field vacancies [and] 185 retirements projected during 2015/2016.” (*Long-term solutions for reducing Sylmar area call response times for fire and emergency medical services*). These two events highlight the fact that budget cuts adversely affected the manpower of the department, which in turn affected public safety. Although the department was able to manage these cuts, this paper will next look at how a global pandemic hurt the already understaffed department.

Lit Review: The Pandemic

With the staffing and budget issues before the pandemic now established, this paper will now look to the early years of COVID-19. On August 18, 2021, the LA City Council adopted Ordinance 187134, which mandated that all city employees be either fully vaccinated for COVID-19 or apply for an exception on medical or religious grounds (LA City Clerk, *Los Angeles Ordinance 187134*). In a letter from Mayor Eric Garcetti to all City Department Heads, he formally stated, “An employee who does not submit proof of their full vaccination status by October 20, 2021 and has not submitted a request for exemption will be issued a Notice of Mandatory COVID-19 Vaccination Policy Requirements ("Notice"). The Notice will instruct the employee to submit proof of full compliance, i.e., being fully vaccinated, no later than the close of business on Saturday, December 18, 2021. “Full compliance” shall mean having had at least 14 days pass since an employee received the final dose of a two-dose COVID-19 vaccine series (Moderna or Pfizer BioNTech) or a single dose of a one-dose COVID-19 vaccine (Johnson & Johnson/Janssen).

Each employee issued a Notice shall be required to sign the Notice and to comply with its terms as outlined above and herein. Failure to sign or comply with the requirements of the Notice shall constitute failure to meet a condition of employment and shall result in appropriate and immediate corrective action.”(Garcetti, *City of Los Angeles Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Re: Mandatory Implementation of Non-Compliance with the Requirements of Ordinance No. 187134*).

As the Los Angeles Fire Department is a city department, this order resulted in 113 Firefighters being removed from duty. Vaccination refusal in the Fire Service was something seen all across the nation, with politics and misinformation playing a dominant role. In August of

2021, Los Angeles City Fire Captain Cristian Granucci, seemingly at his station and in uniform, posted a YouTube video declaring, “I am done being silent on this matter and so are many of our members and this is regarding the vaccine mandate by the city of Los Angeles... we saw this tyranny coming” (Granucci, *Vaccine tyranny: Done being silent.*). Captain Granucci went on to say that this was not a political post, however, the words he uses are directly political in nature. Captain Granucci was placed under investigation for posting his video in uniform, this paper did not discover what resulted from this.

In either case, the loss of 113 employees came at a critical moment and gravely hurt the Los Angeles Fire Department's ability to provide care for their patients. In a January 2022 conference, just a few months after the vaccine refusal deadline, Los Angeles Fire Department Chief Ralph Terrazas said, “As of yesterday, we have 299 firefighters off duty due to the virus, It's the highest we've seen at any one time.” (*We're in crisis mode: staffing shortages worry Lafd Leadership 2022*). In an investigation done by CBS News, it discovered that the manpower losses, “have resulted in firehouses, including the one that officials spoke in front of Thursday morning, not having enough employees to staff an engine, according to sources within the department. At the time of the press conference, Station 4, only had enough employees for two ambulances but not enough for engines. As of last night, there were 166 shifts left unfilled for Thursday. The staffing shortages are worrying for the LAFD brass as some have said "morale is an all-time low" and "we're in crisis mode, big time." (*We're in crisis mode: staffing shortages worry Lafd Leadership 2022*). In a public statement, Los Angeles Fire Department stated that in order to fill the gaps, “the city has canceled all leaves for firefighters, and in certain cases, firefighters may not go home after their 24-hour shifts to maintain safety in this city. When they are on shift, firefighters will now be required to wear N95 and KN95 masks. The department has

also decreased the days of isolation from 10 days to seven.” (*We're in crisis mode: staffing shortages worry Lafd Leadership* 2022).

To summarize this period, the Los Angeles Fire Department rapidly lost a large chunk of its staff, which led to a staffing crisis that resulted in the remaining members being forced to work incredibly long hours without adequate rest.

Lit Review: The Cost

In a report to the Board of Fire Commissioners titled, “LAFD BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAM UPDATE ON CASELOAD AND IMPACT OF COVID-19” the Behavioral Health Program (BHP) stated that during COVID it had an increase of LAFD patients that, “increased steadily 20-30% by May 2020 and maintained this consistency until February 2021. In March 2021, the BHP noticed a 70% increase in requests for assistance,” it went on to say, “Of the individuals being treated from May 2020-August 2021, 32% reported an increase of psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. There was also a 5% increase in suicidal thoughts and behaviors” (*LAFD Behavioral Health Program Update on Caseload and Impact of COVID-19* 2023).

Burnout is well documented within the Fire Service, leading to, “lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated, disappointed, exhausted, and isolated. It’s also commonly referred to as compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, emergency responder exhaustion or burnout. These emotions can then relate to poor patient care with a lack of empathy and subpar attention which can lead to missing important signs and symptoms, as well as medical errors.” (Thompson, *Being realistic about burnout in Ems* 2024).

Procedures

As this research paper is historical in nature, DGI's were not applied. This paper draws from historical data relating to the Los Angeles Fire Department's staffing before and during COVID-19, and what the ramifications were.

To answer the question "Were there events before the outbreak that made the Los Angeles Fire Department vulnerable?" this paper examined two moments that highlight a staffing issue that preceded the pandemic. It is logical to conclude that these staffing issues left the department vulnerable to the crisis that decimated the workforce during COVID-19.

To answer the question "What exactly happened during the opening years of the pandemic?" this paper studied the numbers of employees who were off duty for sickness and anti-vaccination.

This paper then looked to the Department's response solution of denying leave and mandating overtime hours, after which the ramifications of declining mental health and burnout were discussed and how these two factors contributed to one another.

The question, "what can be done to be more prepared in the future" this paper will cover later in this paper.

One limitation of this paper is the difficulty in connecting cause and correlation. The opening years of COVID-19 affected every aspect of life, chaos was the norm and the Department was forced to make sudden changes based on the intelligence and resources that they had.

Results

In the years before COVID-19, the Los Angeles Fire Department had budget cuts that resulted in the loss of personnel and resources. This established a manpower deficit that hurt the Department when COVID-19 came to Los Angeles, after which more personnel were lost to sickness and refused to be vaccinated.

In response to the massive and abrupt loss of manpower, the Los Angeles Fire Department resorted to mandated overtime to fill the gaps.

This in turn led to burnout in the working force and a noteworthy decline in mental health across the Department.

Discussion

After observing the timeline of events that led to the staffing crisis of the Department, a key trend can be identified: Los Angeles Fire Department became heavy-handed when dealing with its staff. Los Angeles was not the first city to be hit by COVID-19 and other departments in other states had already been firing members for vaccine refusal; the refusal made by some Los Angeles Fire Department members should not have been a surprise and plans should have been made. Likewise, it was heavy-handed in forcing members to work incredible hours of overtime that left them feeling burned out, anxious, and depressed.

This paper observes that the leadership of the Los Angeles Fire Department did not have the ‘buy-in’ of its Firefighters and communication from the top down was ineffective. Open discussions about vaccines where members could have voiced doubts would have contributed to a better vaccine rate, for the mandate was created to serve the interests of the public, as opposed to ‘tyranny.’

Additionally, members who refused could have potentially been placed in positions that didn't deal with public matters, and other members could have replaced them.

The effects of burnout and COVID-19 anxiety were necessary evils against this pandemic, however, there should have been better communication and planning to allow members the appropriate downtime to address concerns. Good morale is the bedrock of the Fire Service, without it the needs of the public will not be met.

Recommendations

This paper recommends

- Staffing and manpower must be viewed through the lens of disaster management. Massive and sudden losses in staffing must be expected, especially during events of mass infections.
- Planning for events such as pandemics should assume a casualty rate that severely hinders operational ability. A good plan, for example, might assume a 60% loss in personnel. In this situation, what is the best course of action? What would the department do to provide good customer service without overly affecting the remaining staff in an adverse way.
- It is impossible to truly predict what the next pandemic will look like, each one is different from the other. Therefore, one must identify what is within control and this paper has shown that staffing is a fundamental aspect.

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