

Internal

CONSENT CALENAR
MAY 7, 2024

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To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Sophie Hahn (Author), Mayor Arreguin (Co-Sponsor)

Subject: CARE Program for Berkeley Fire

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the FY2025/2026 Budget Process funding for programs that offer care and support for our firefighters and emergency medical service workers (First Responders), the equipment they rely on, and the homes and workplaces we provide for them.

1. For a two-year **Pilot Project to Screen for Cancer**:
 - \$40,000 annually for two years to fund on-going age and risk-based full body cancer scans for First Responders that are subjected to carcinogens during the normal course of their work.
2. To add an FTE to the Fire Department for an **In-House Fire Mechanic** to service Fire Apparatus on-site and better meet the complex, unique, and time-sensitive needs of the Fire Department, and to save firefighters and the City time and money on outsourced maintenance service:
 - \$203,107 for one FTE, ongoing and inclusive of benefits, for a Lead Fire Mechanic.
 - \$350,000 in one-time funds to purchase the necessary tools and equipment.
3. For a **Fire Reserve Program**, offering internships with training to motivated High School graduates and/or college students who may enter the Fire Service after completion of the program, and to support recruitment:
 - \$120,000 per year, ongoing, to cover salaries for 6 interns, training, supervision, and equipment.
4. For one-time “FFE” (Furniture, Fixtures, and Equipment) **upgrades to all Fire Stations**, including but not limited to new appliances, enhancements to prevent cancer (decontamination dryers, carcinogen-reducing soaps/detergents, etc.), lighting, furniture, and other amenities to improve living, health, and working conditions:
 - \$140,000 to provide \$20,000 for each of the City’s seven Fire Stations in one fiscal year.

- Alternatively, \$70,000 in FY 2025 and in FY 2026, providing \$10,000 per year for each Fire Station over two years, for a two-year total of \$140,000.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Berkeley's First Responders provide essential services to our community, 24/7. Unlike all other City staff, they are also required to live apart from their homes and families for 24 to 96 hour shifts, sleeping, eating, and taking care of personal needs in living quarters provided by the City of Berkeley.

In the course of their work, First Responders are exposed to toxins that are proven to increase risks of cancer. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, firefighters have a 9% higher risk of developing cancer and a 14% higher risk of dying from cancer compared to the general public.¹

First Responders also rely on vehicles and equipment that are highly specialized, state-of-the-art, and must be in good working condition. If an engine is out of service or equipment is in need of cleaning or repair, First Responders cannot do their work at the highest levels of safety and effectiveness.

To ensure the City of Berkeley cares for the health and wellbeing of our First Responders and the facilities and equipment they rely on, this item proposes funding a suite of initiatives that provide the care and support our Fire Department needs to deliver their critical services to the community.

Care for our Firefighters' Health: Advanced cancer screening for individuals with the longest exposure to toxins associated with Fire Service will allow for early, pre-emptive detection and early treatment of cancers.

Care for the Vehicles our First Responders and Community Rely On: An in-House Lead Fire Mechanic will provide rapid, on-site repairs to fire apparatus, ensuring vehicles are in good working condition at all times, increasing regular maintenance to delay or avoid major repairs, keeping apparatus in use rather than waiting for smaller mechanical matters to be serviced off-site, and saving both time and money for the City.

Support for Routine Tasks and Recruitment of Future First Responders: Interns hired through the Fire Reserve Program will support logistics, training, equipment maintenance and more. The program will also allow for the development of skills and relationships that build bridges to the City's recruitment pipeline. Similar programs in other jurisdictions have yielded a stream of interested and qualified candidates for entry level classifications.

¹ "Impact of Occupational Cancer." *U.S. Fire Administration*, 11 Oct. 2022, www.usfa.fema.gov/about/usfa-events/2022-10-11-usfa-summit/firefighter-cancer/.

Care for First Responders' Homes and Workplaces: While major remodels/rebuilds of Fire Stations as called for in the Fire Department's Facility Master Plan are not currently funded, small upgrades and amenities can make a big difference in the comfort, health, and enjoyment of these homes-away-from-home, which also double as workspaces. By providing the Fire Department with the equivalent of \$20,000 per station over one or two years, small upgrades and amenities, including purchase of equipment and products that can reduce cancer risks, can be acquired to make a significant positive difference in the lives, health, and work of First Responders.

BACKGROUND

Introduction:

The Berkeley Fire Department operates out of seven fire stations, most of which were built during the 1960s. During the 1960s-70s, ten stations were reduced to seven, the workweek was reduced from 63 to 56 hours per week, and staffing was reduced from four firefighters per engine company to three. Currently, there are nine fire companies, amounting to a total of 120 firefighters. The Department is in the process of staffing ambulances with non-firefighter paramedics, with 15 currently employed. The most recent class began in October 2023, and the transition is due to be completed by July 2025, with a full ambulance staff of 32.

Budget and staffing cuts have occurred against the backdrop of growing population and increased housing and commercial space, including many mid- and high-rise structures. In a September 13 report to the City Council, Chief Sprague highlighted some of the challenges faced by the department as a result of underinvestment, including potential staff shortages, slowed response times, and insufficient staff in the event of a severe fire or earthquake.

The June 8th, 2023 Standards of Cover Study and Community Risk Assessment report by Citygate Associates found that the Department's minimum daily staffing is sufficient for a "modest single-family house fire or small commercial building fire at the ground floor." However, current staffing levels are insufficient to provide necessary response to severe fires.

Fire Stations are in need of major repairs, as detailed in the Fire Department's May 2023 Facilities Master Plan. While Berkeley Fire facilities have undergone some modifications since their construction, these improvements have not been to the extent necessary to "properly house modern apparatus, equipment, additional units and new staff, nor to meet current policy, codes and health, safety and inclusion standards. Additionally, many of the stations house outdated features (such as hose drying towers) and hinder healthy environmental practices (such as physical training in apparatus bays). Without further renovation, replacement or relocation, the stations will continue to fall short of addressing the present day needs and expanding and changing operational demands."

Difficulties in recruitment are not unique to Berkeley. Low pay, poor work-life balance, and occupational hazards have resulted in a nationwide First Responder shortage. However, Berkeley can be a model for the nation by ensuring its responders, and their living and working conditions, get the care and attention they deserve.

Cancer Screening - Background:

Firefighters are routinely exposed to carcinogens through inhalation, absorption, and even ingestion. When residential or commercial buildings burn, they release cancer-causing agents known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), asbestos, and diesel exhaust. Firefighters who responded to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center have been the subject of much research, and studies consistently confirm elevated rates of cancer. In the last year alone, five retired Berkeley Firefighters have been diagnosed with cancer.

Despite the statistics indicating the high risk of cancer among firefighters, individuals still experience obstacles to early cancer screenings because their occupation is often not taken into account. Recently, in a Memorandum of Understanding with its Fire Department, the City of Hayward approved annual cancer screenings for its Firefighters:

“The City will provide an annual comprehensive cancer screening mutually agreed upon by Local 1909 and the Fire Chief. All testing is to be scheduled and completed on-duty during the month of February each year.”

Berkeley Fire estimates a cost of \$1,600 per person for advanced cancer screenings. The Cancer Screening Pilot will prioritize firefighters with the greatest number of years in fire service. The first year will include all firefighters with at least 5 years working in the fire service, in order to get a baseline scan – this cost has been covered by the Department in FY24 with one-time funds that were available.

The rotation following the baseline year is based on risk, which generally correlates to age and years of service. Members that are 50 years of age or older receive a scan every 3 years, members between 36-49 years old receive a scan every 5 years, and members between 23-35 years old receive a scan every 7 years. This breakdown results in an annual budget of not more than \$40,000 per year or \$80,000 to fund the total cost of the two-year pilot.

In-House Mechanic - Background:

Currently the Berkeley Fire Department does not have its own dedicated, on-site mechanic. Because Fire shares a mechanic with other departments centralized in Public Works, the Department often must seek outside repairs due to staffing, internal mechanic certification, vacancy rate, and workload. Because this is a highly specialized job, outsourcing repairs is extremely costly and time consuming. In 2022, the Department incurred \$440,000 in apparatus maintenance costs, a majority of which was labor, through an outside vendor. In addition, when fire vehicles are sent to off-site shops, it requires hours of shuttling apparatus back and forth to Sacramento, using fire personnel that are assigned to other duties, and leaves these critical vehicles out of the City for weeks to months at a time.

In FY 2023, the Department spent \$303,000 on maintenance and repairs within the first four months of the year. With a dedicated on-site mechanic, a greater portion of repairs could be accomplished in-house – at lower cost and with significantly fewer vehicle-days out of service.

The Alameda County Fire Department has its own dedicated team of mechanics at its Vehicle Maintenance Facility, “responsible for maintaining the operational readiness of the Department’s fleet of apparatus and support vehicles. Performing routine and emergency repairs, safety inspections, preventative maintenance, communications equipment installation, and emergency apparatus outfitting.”² This and other regional maintenance facilities are not able to service Berkeley’s fleet due to staffing, workload and facility constraints.

Berkeley can model its own in-house Fire Mechanic Service after Alameda County’s successful program. Hiring one full-time employee for this specialized function would save the City significant funds in the long-run and ensure appropriate apparatus are functional and available in the event of emergencies. Additionally, there may be an opportunity to contract this function out to nearby municipalities as a means to share a valued service, and gain revenue to support a robust program for Berkeley.

Fire Reserve Program - Background:

The Fire Department is experiencing challenges in recruitment and retention - as are Fire Departments throughout the Bay Area. In an increasingly competitive environment, it’s important for Berkeley to invest in the development of potential future Berkeley First Responders. The Fire Reserve Program is an effective strategy to recruit new talent by developing skills and relationships that can translate into a desire to join Berkeley Fire.

This program would see the creation of six paid part-time internships for young people to gain training and experience with the BFD. Berkeley Fire already has successful partnerships with Berkeley High School and YouthWorks, which can be expanded and improved upon.

Offering reserve positions to motivated individuals can yield substantial long-term benefits, particularly in the recruitment of full-time firefighters, paramedics, and EMTs. These programs provide meaningful experiences to our youth that translate to valuable life skills useful in day-to-day settings, making them more attractive to future employers. These programs also provide meaningful options for high school students who do not plan to attend college directly out of high school.

Fire Station Care Program - Background:

Fire Stations are not just workplaces; they are also homes where our first responders live for 24 to 96 hour shifts. They sleep, exercise, socialize, eat meals, and recreate in our stations, 24/7. While this item does not address the need for major renovations, as documented in the recent Fire Facilities Master Plan Report that was delivered to Council on May 16, 2023, small changes can have outsized positive impacts on the comfort, health, and enjoyment of these homes-away-from-home.

² “Stations and Facilities.” *Alameda County Fire Department*, <https://fire.acgov.org/stations-and-facilities/>.

Small grants for each fire station for “FFE” – furniture, fixtures, and equipment – a total of \$20,000 per station over one or two years, will help fund the acquisition of new kitchen equipment, furniture, lighting, appliances, blinds, cancer-preventative equipment and supplies, and other amenities that create a more welcoming and comfortable environment, and improve morale.

CONSULTATION/OUTREACH OVERVIEW & RESULTS

The Berkeley Fire Department was consulted regarding the need for each of these programs, and has expressed strong support.

IMPLEMENTATION, ADMINISTRATION AND ENFORCEMENT

Each program will have its own administration through the Fire Department.

FISCAL IMPACTS

See referral language.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

No environmental impacts.

OUTCOMES & EVALUATION

Each of these funding requests is related to a specific need, and anticipates positive outcomes, as described above. Evaluation for effectiveness of each program in meeting its intended goals should be undertaken by the Department at appropriate times.

For the Cancer Pilot, evaluation should take place at the end of the two-year period to determine the value of the program and consider ongoing funding for a cancer screening program covering all Fire staff going forward.

For the In-House Mechanic Program, the Department will track costs and benefits associated with an on-site mechanic in dollars, efficiency, and across other relevant metrics and, after three years of experience with the program, consider whether to continue and/or expand services.

For the Fire Reserve Program, evaluation should happen after three years to determine whether the internship program is effectively supporting First Responders in their day-to-day work and whether program participants are applying for academies or positions within the service.

For the Fire Station Care Program, evaluation could include a survey to measure the satisfaction levels of First Responders with improvements paid for by station care funds.

CONTACT

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