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Axes fall for police, firefighters in Camden

By Matt Katz Inquirer Staff Writer

Following through on threats once considered unthinkable, the mayor of Camden on Tuesday laid off almost half the city's Police Department, nearly a third of its firefighters, and more than 100 other workers.

"I cannot stress enough that Camden's fiscal realities are not made up," Mayor Dana L. Redd said, citing a \$26.5 million deficit in the city recently ranked the second most violent in the country.

"We are operating in a culture of disbelief, that on the ninth hour some truckload of cash is going to pull up in the city of Camden."

Redd blasted the unions that represent the 168 police officers and 67 firefighters who were laid off, saying their leadership had refused to submit "meaningful" contractual concessions, stoked fear during negotiations, and never let members vote on cost-saving ideas.

Before Redd's noontime remarks, made in her City Hall office, jammed with TV cameras, laid-off police officers and firefighters joined together under the icy rain downtown.

The police lined Federal Street with a row of boots they would no longer need. Firefighters, some with family members in tow, applauded.

"The [police] chief's favorite saying is, 'We're going to put as many boots on the street as possible,'" said Bob Thomas, laid off after 10 years as a police officer and now unsure how he can afford care for his developmentally disabled son.

"Here's your boots. They're on the street, and there's no one in them."

In a sign of how poor the city of 79,000 is, Camden residents who saw the boots stopped to see if they were being given away, Thomas said.

After the police ceremony, the procession of public safety officers headed to the fire administration building, where dismissed firefighters, some in tears, walked through a path of their brethren and laid down their helmets. Their police comrades applauded.

Luis Sanchez, 31, a father of four who fought an "all-hands" fire Monday morning, broke down when he set his helmet down.

"All the hard work and sweat you put in, going through the academy and on the job, and they take it away that fast," he said.

Firefighter William Johnson, 25, who served in Iraq, said he would visit his Marine recruitment officer Wednesday to reenlist for active duty. "I need to secure a future," he said.

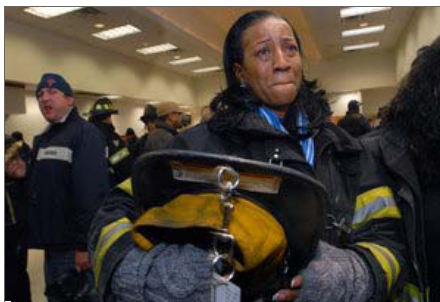
At the news conference, Police Chief Scott Thomson reiterated that the department would be realigned to keep Camden as safe as possible. State and federal agencies will help, he said, and the Camden County Park Police are riding in squad cars.

"This is not going to be easy. We understand that. But the mission will be maintained," he said.

Thomson said he had "eliminated virtually all of our administrative functions" and would no longer dispatch officers to car accidents without injuries, minor thefts, and reports of property damage.

In addition to the layoffs, 45 officers were demoted, meaning some will be back on the streets for the first time in years.

Camden County Prosecutor Warren Faulk, who oversees homicide investigations in the city and faces 68 potential layoffs of his own staff, said the cuts "will have consequences beyond the City of Camden's borders."



Firefighter Renee Muhammad was one of over 300 Camden City police officers, firefighters and other municipal workers who were laid off today. Muhammad was one of four female firefighters, and three of those lost their jobs. (April Saul / Staff Photographer)

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"City police do more than patrol the streets . . . and losing so many officers will make our task of putting dangerous people into prison through convictions and pleas more difficult," Faulk said in a statement.

Camden's four public-safety unions are working on expired contracts, making negotiations more complex.

Redd recently angered police and firefighters when she seemed to hedge on a promise to use \$5.5 million in last-minute state appropriations - \$1.5 million from Gov. Christie and \$4 million in an overdue payment from South Jersey Port Corp. - to save jobs.

On Tuesday, Redd said that she was "seeking" to use the money to reduce layoffs but wanted the unions to match the money with dollar-to-dollar concessions.

Redd reserved most of her criticism for the two fire unions, which she said proposed salary increases instead of cuts.

Kenneth Chambers, president of the rank-and-file firefighters' union, said he was flabbergasted by the remark. Even though an arbitrator suggested wage increases, Chambers said he had offered to freeze wages and make concessions such as increasing medical co-payments during talks with the city attorney on Friday.

Chambers said the city keeps changing what it wants. Redd has told reporters she wants \$2 million from each bargaining unit, but on Friday, Chambers said he was told the city wanted \$7.5 million in cuts from his union.

"Every time we have a meeting, it changes," Chambers said. "It appears that they want people laid off."

On the police side, Redd said she had productive discussions Monday, and she left the door open for calling back as many as 100 officers if the unions accepted furloughs, pay cuts, and elimination of perks.

But she lumped firefighters and police together in describing the unions' desire to protect "high salaries" while stoking "public fear" through incendiary advertisements and fliers.

Such comments angered Fraternal Order of Police lodge president, John Williamson, who said he had been optimistic after four hours of talks with Redd the night before.

"That makes me feel that the four hours I spent with the mayor on Monday night were a waste of my time," he said.

The police union will be in Superior Court on Wednesday morning to seek an injunction to stop the layoffs.

In pressing the public-safety unions for concessions, Redd cited the sacrifices by non-uniformed employees. Workers, including Redd, were furloughed every Friday for half of 2010, and more than 20 were laid off in 2009.

Of the approximately 380 civilian employees left in the city, 113 were laid off Tuesday, including 20-year employee Bill Lutz, bumped from his job as city records manager by an aide working for City Council.

"Why would anyone want to relocate to Camden now?" Lutz asked, referring to the loss in services.

Civil service rules that govern layoffs of unionized workers take into account years of experience and job titles, a confusing process that left many in City Hall scratching their heads Tuesday about who was leaving, who was staying, and who had been demoted. The man who runs the computers in City Hall lost his job, as did half the housing inspectors, including two with more than 20 years' experience.

Other departments will be similarly affected, including animal control, which lost all its employees and will be privatized; public works, which is responsible for boarding up the thousands of abandoned buildings that become fire hazards; and Municipal Court, already notorious for its long waits.

"I am upset and terrified," said resident Karen E. Simmons, 48, a public school teacher whose father was a firefighter. "My safety is the most important thing to me. My students' safety is also at risk now."

Although the layoffs had been threatened since the summer and drew national media attention, there has been no organized public outcry and no large-scale protest by the unions. Only one City Council meeting has been crowded since the announcement months ago, and that was filled largely with firefighters and their families.

A civic group, Camden Churches Organized for People, held two news conferences but could not get the mayor to sit down with its leaders.

City Council members have also mostly been quiet. Since City Council President Frank Moran drew attention, and counter-fire, for holding the governor accountable late last year, he has not responded to requests for interviews.

The layoffs were caused only in small part by Christie's funding cuts. The governor last year provided almost as much financial support as Gov. Jon S. Corzine had. Adjusted for inflation, Camden is receiving \$115.6 million in state aid, compared with \$120.8 million providing by Corzine in his last year in office, according to the nonprofit group Camconnect.

Other long-simmering factors decimated Camden's budget, which gets about 80 percent of its funding from the state.

Among the issues:

A seven-year state takeover, which ended last year, that forbade tax increases and offered tax abatements to new developments.

A history of poor budgeting by state and city officials.

A half-century decline in home ownership and taxable businesses.

A spike in the cost of benefits for unionized city workers.

A low tax-collection rate.

Unusually high payouts to retiring city employees.

An increase in the number of city employees.

The high cost of providing services in a city with a century-old infrastructure and an impoverished population.

Tuesday's layoffs only save money for the fiscal year that ends in June. Since the fiscal issues are endemic, more layoffs are possible by the end of 2011.

"Have we come to a critical crossroads?" Redd asked. "Absolutely. But we will not give up on Camden."