

Firefighters' compensation varies widely between city and county

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Not surprisingly, there is a broad range in compensation among firefighters in Paducah and McCracken County.

In most of the county's six fire protection districts, fire chiefs are paid, and many volunteer firefighters receive either a stipend or split a small pool of funds based on the number of calls they respond to.

For the Paducah Fire Department, nearly 85 percent of its budget goes for personnel. The 2017-18 personnel budget, excluding inspections and code enforcement, is \$6.4 million.

Paducah's personnel costs, department hierarchy and staffing levels are similar to those in most Kentucky cities of similar or slightly larger size.

Paducah Fire Chief Steve Kyle earned \$111,354 last year, two deputy chiefs averaged \$83,304 and three assistant chiefs averaged \$78,323. The averager pay of the city's two fire marshals in 2016 was \$48,827.

Each of Paducah's five fire stations is covered by a staff of three or four, each working 24 hours on, 48 hours off. Each shift is led by a captain and usually includes one lieutenant and at least one person classified as firefighter or firefighter/relief driver.

Last year, the PFD's 16 captains' average earnings were \$65,128, with 15 lieutenants averaging \$63,729 and 21 firefighters averaging \$56,177. Captains, lieutenants and firefighters are all covered by the union contract.

According to Paducah Finance Director Jon Perkins, most union employees average 832 hours of scheduled overtime each year in addition to the 2,080 hours worked at their base rate.

In McCracken County's six fire protection districts, Concord Fire Chief Bob McGowan is the highest paid employee, earning \$51,000 last year and \$53,000 this year. He is also given a \$4,000 pension allowance, and the fire district pays a health insurance cost differential needed to add him to his wife's coverage.

In the Loan Oak Fire Protection District, Chief Larry Freeman and Asst. Chief Dave Wright split a total of \$60,000 between them and a business manager. The Reidland-Farley District pays Chief Rick Archer a \$10,000 salary and pays a part-time administrative aide \$6,000. Hendron Fire Protection Chief Doug Cooper is paid \$500 per month.

In the West McCracken District, Chief Donald Elrod stopped taking a salary at the beginning of the year because over \$300,000 in annual tax revenues that had been coming from United States Enrichment Corporation went away after ownership reverted to the Department of Energy.

Fire district volunteers have begun receiving stipends to encourage more regular response to emergency calls and to provide part-time staffing of their firehouses.

For nearly a year, the Concord district has staffed its main firehouse with two volunteers during the week on the days and times when the majority of emergency calls are received. Volunteers receive \$80 for each 10-hour shift.

According to Concord Fire Protection District Treasurer Ron Miller, the district increased staffing to three for the weekday shifts in July and increased the stipend budget by 50 percent to \$62,400 this year.

Miller said that although "a lot of volunteers get a small amount," his district had one volunteer firefighter staff the station five days a week for most of last year and earned nearly \$20,000.

The Lone Oak District pays a \$175 weekly stipend to a designated "officer in charge" and a \$24,000 annual "bonus" pool is paid out each six months among volunteers based upon the number of calls they respond to.

The Reidland-Farley District has a similar but slightly smaller annual pool of \$18,000. Its payouts are based upon points volunteers receive for training attendance, detail completion and responding to emergency calls.

The West McCracken District pays each volunteer who responds to a structure fire \$50.

The Hedron District reimburses volunteers 50 cents per mile when they drive personal vehicles to and from a fire, and to and from the firehouse for scheduled training.

The wide variances in compensation between paid city departments and rural fire districts are common elsewhere in the state.