

Fire union sues city

SAN ANTONIO — A state district judge Wednesday ordered the city to temporarily cease demanding that members of the Fire Department submit documentation proving that their dependents are eligible for city-funded health insurance.

The San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association sought the temporary restraining order after Chief Charles Hood issued a directive to firefighters whose personnel files are incomplete.

Chris Steele, president of the firefighters union, said he believes that Hood's directive is “unlawful” and wants the city to explain why it doesn't already have birth certificates, marriage licenses and other documents that were already used to prove eligibility.

City Manager Sheryl Sculley said she was disappointed to learn of the latest lawsuit — the third time the union has gone to court over the matter.

“My responsibility is to ensure that any person receiving health care benefits from the city is qualified to receive such benefits funded by San Antonio taxpayers,” she said in a statement. “Dependent health care verifications are a nationwide best practice of private and public employers and have already been completed for city civilian employees and police officers.”

This year, a task force formed to study public-safety legacy costs recommended that annual dependent health care verifications be the status quo in San Antonio.

“We fail to understand why the firefighter labor union will not cooperate with the health care verification process,” Sculley said. “What do they have to hide?”

Steele said his members have always submitted the proper paperwork to add dependents to their health care plans and that he believes that the city has lost the sensitive information.

“We're not hiding anything. They have my son's birth certificate,” Steele said. “They're asking for it again. Our response is, 'Where did the first one go?’”

Deputy City Manager Erik Walsh, who oversees the police and fire departments, acknowledged that in past years, the city hadn't been as vigilant as it should have been in verifying dependent eligibility. Now, employees whose files are missing information are being asked to provide it. Once the city obtains the proper documents proving eligibility, firefighters would merely have to affirm in subsequent years that the information is still valid.

“First we have to make sure everything in the files is correct,” he said. “That's the verification process we're trying to go through right now.”

The issue of health care for public safety personnel and their dependents is a key element in negotiations this year between the city and the unions representing firefighters and police officers.

Their current collective bargaining agreements expire in September, and Sculley has steadfastly insisted that uniform personnel no longer receive the rich health care coverage they have now, which includes small deductibles and maximum out-of-pocket amounts and no monthly premiums.

She has proposed switching firefighters and police to the civilian health care plan, which covers about 70 percent of the cost. Negotiations with the police union are underway but have yet to begin with the fire union. Those talks may not begin until well into the summer.

According to court documents, the fire union and the city will appear in court this month to argue over the temporary restraining order.

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PDF: Plaintiff's original petition for declaratory and injunctive relief

PDF: Temporary restraining order

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