
Fire and police are well-compensated, analysis shows



By Josh Baugh

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SAN ANTONIO — More than 400 of San Antonio's 500 highest-paid city employees are members of the police and fire departments, according to an analysis that City Manager Sheryl Sculley privately shared with the City Council in advance of contract negotiations between officials and the public safety unions.

The city manager briefed the council during an executive session last week and plans to discuss her findings during a public meeting Wednesday. She shared the information exclusively with the San Antonio Express-News.

Sculley's review of the data from fiscal 2013,

which ended Sept. 30, includes base salaries, leave buyback, overtime, specialty pay and stipends. The city pays toward uniform employees' pre-funded retiree health care and pensions on most categories of specialty pay, though overtime isn't a "pensionable" portion of their paychecks.

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Among the findings of the analysis: Of the top 100 employees, 66 are public safety personnel; of the 73 workers who earn more than \$150,000, 40 of them wear a uniform.

Rhetoric has continued to build as the city and the unions enter into collective bargaining negotiations, which include salaries and health care. The police and fire unions have focused on their base pay, but Sculley has said those figures don't offer a complete picture of their earning power.

“The point of this is, you have to look at total compensation,” she said.

The analysis, too, highlights the effects of specialty pay and overtime.

For example, then-District Fire Chief Lawrence Trevino earned an annual salary of \$93,648 but received total compensation of \$210,738 because of \$115,000 in overtime and specialty pay. That income surpassed that of both Police Chief William McManus and Fire Chief Charles Hood, who respectively earned \$203,649 and \$197,452.

Sculley's analysis appears to be in direct response to a number of public comments made by police and fire union representatives about the level of Sculley's salary and those of her top executives.

In fiscal year 2013, Sculley earned a total of \$414,156, with a base salary of \$355,000. Convention & Visitors Bureau Director Casandra Matej was the second-highest-paid employee, with total compensation reaching \$234,032. And Sculley's two deputy city managers, Peter Zanoni and Erik Walsh, rank third and fourth, earning totals of \$227,448 and \$213,315.

More than half of the 50 highest-paid San Antonio employees are civilians who don't earn overtime or specialty pay. But they do receive allowances for cars and cellphones, among other things.

The vast majority of the top-500 list, however, is composed of uniform personnel — 405 to be exact.

Sculley warned last summer that, if left unchecked, public safety costs would overtake the general fund, which currently sits at about \$1 billion, within the next couple of decades. City staffers identified health care expenses as a significant reason for escalating costs.

The City Council reacted by forming a task force charged with examining health care and retirement benefits for the city's uniform personnel. The 13-member group included police and fire representatives, as well as civilians and business people.

During the course of eight meetings over five months, the group argued over data and wasn't able to reach consensus beyond a series of general statements, which former Councilman and task force Chairman Reed Williams presented to the council this year.

Four members wrote a “minority report” challenging the task force's findings. Among other things, their report focused on a comparative study commissioned by the city of Austin that analyzed base pay

for police officers and firefighters across several Texas cities. Its findings include that an Austin officer with three years of service earns a base pay of \$68,819, while a commensurate officer in San Antonio earns \$57,468.

“That’s true, but it’s only part of the story,” Sculley said. “You have to look at special pays. For example, our police and fire have 15 to 17 special pays. Some of what we have in special pay is in the base pay in Austin. So it’s not a complete story to just look at base pay.”

San Antonio Police Officers Association President Mike Helle, who hadn’t yet seen Sculley’s analysis, said he doesn’t think overtime should be included in the total calculation because it’s not a guaranteed earning.

When it comes to negotiating the collective bargaining agreements, Helle said, “we’re in agreement that it’s a total-compensation package — that’s what we sit down and negotiate with.”

Helle said that at first blush, Sculley’s inclusion of overtime seemed like more “trickery.”

The city manager countered that overtime makes it onto employees’ W-2 forms and is part of their total compensation.

And it is guaranteed, city officials said. According to Sculley, the city budgets about \$23 million a year for Fire Department overtime and about \$10 million for police.

In fiscal 2013, the city spent more than \$10 million on overtime just for the 405 uniformed personnel in the police and fire departments who are among the city’s top 500 earners. That averages nearly \$25,000 per first responder.

Jesse Renteria, a fire captain, earned the most overtime pay, banking \$93,730 — eclipsing that of Trevino. His base salary was \$81,816, but he took home an additional \$1,133 by selling unused vacation days and \$22,612 in specialty pay, bringing his total compensation to \$199,291, also exceeding Hood’s pay. Some of his overtime included working relief efforts for Hurricane Sandy, city officials said, for which San Antonio was reimbursed.

In fiscal 2013, 47 firefighters on the top-500 list made more than \$50,000 in overtime, and the overwhelming majority earned some level of overtime.

Chris Steele, president of the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association, bristled at Sculley's analysis. Paying overtime instead of hiring more personnel is her decision, Steele said, and buying back unused vacation time saves the city from having to pay more overtime to cover shifts.

“To include that into a cost, we've got to look at all the other things she's including,” he said. “That muddies the water a little bit.”

Every uniform employee also earns some level of specialty pay. On the top-500 list, the annual amount ranges from \$1,500 to \$53,417.

Nim Kidd, who has a unique arrangement, earned the most. While he's listed in city records as a district fire chief who earns a base salary of \$93,648, he hasn't actually worked in San Antonio since he was appointed assistant director of the Texas Department of Public Safety.

But he's not a state employee. Kidd's arrangement has him “called up” from the city to work for DPS under a deal that includes Texas A&M's Engineering Extension Service. The city is completely reimbursed for the cost of keeping Kidd employed here.

Why didn't he officially go to work for the state?

Because he wanted to continue earning credit toward his San Antonio pension, according to Walsh, the deputy city manager.

The city pays more than 24 percent into the San Antonio Fire and Police Pension Fund on behalf of uniform personnel, who pay a little more 12 percent. According to job listings on the DPS website, the state pays 61/2 percent of gross salary.

Kidd reaches 20 years of service in April, and he'll have to decide whether to retire from the city or leave his post with DPS and come back to the Fire Department, Walsh said.

Kidd's not the only first responder on the list to earn significant amounts of specialty pay. Besides him, nearly 20 firefighters and police officers earn at least \$30,000 or more in specialty pay, which includes more than a dozen categories, such as longevity, shift differential, special certification, uniform and equipment allowances and bilingual pay.

San Antonio's elected leaders will ultimately have to approve new contracts for the fire and police

department unions — and they have a close hold on their opinions on the matter. It's not uncommon to hear them say that first responders need to be well compensated and that the city needs to be fiscally responsible at the same time.

Mayor Julián Castro is no exception.

“The best analysis is to understand the entire compensation of an employee, whether that is a (civilian) employee or a first responder,” he said. “We'll take into account total compensation.”

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