

Public safety officers aren't suffering



] Billy Calzada, San Antonio Express-News

Police and firefighters union members listen as City Council hears recommendations of a task force considering their retirement and health benefits last month.

Express-News Editorial Board

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SAN ANTONIO — Police and firefighters don't get into public service to strike it rich.

These stressful and dangerous jobs warrant fair compensation and benefits. Fair to the first responders who put their lives at risk for the safety of the community. And fair to the public that supports these benefits.

It's striking, then, to see that more than 400 of the city's 500 highest-paid employees were members of the police and fire departments in fiscal 2013.

This includes base pay, leave buyback, overtime and specialty pay.

Cash compensation ranges from \$210,738 on the high end of the top 500 for then-District Fire Chief Lawrence Trevino to a little more than \$114,000 for several police sergeants and a detective.

In each of these cases, base salaries were given significant boosts from overtime and specialty pay. Jesse Renteria, a fire captain, reflects this in the perfect extreme.

Renteria's base salary was \$81,816, but with overtime and other benefits, the total compensation surged to nearly \$200,000.

This isn't likely to build much public support as public safety unions spar with city officials over health care contributions. Not when public safety employees made up 66 of the top-100 compensated city employees in fiscal 2013.

Although salaries have become the latest political football between city management and public safety unions, this is really about health care cost negotiations. Routine costs, at that. Not benefits for on-the-job injuries or tragedies.

The city's medical costs for police and firefighters have skyrocketed from \$21.46 million in 2003 to nearly \$52 million.

The benefits are rich by most anyone's standards. Uniformed workers don't have to pay premiums for either themselves or spouses and families. Their deductibles are incredibly low.

If left unchecked, public safety costs will eventually consume the city's general fund, City Manager Sheryl Sculley has said.

Equally troubling, though, is seeing total compensation and benefits that are so out of line with the public. The city pays more than 24 percent into the police and firefighter pension fund. The uniform employees contribute 12 percent, but workers in the private sector are lucky to get a 6 percent employer match for their 401(k) plans.

Besides, judging by these compensation figures, there appears to be plenty of room to pay premiums and higher deductibles.

City Council must consider total compensation, not just base salaries, when examining health care benefits for police and firefighters.

That would be fair to taxpayers.