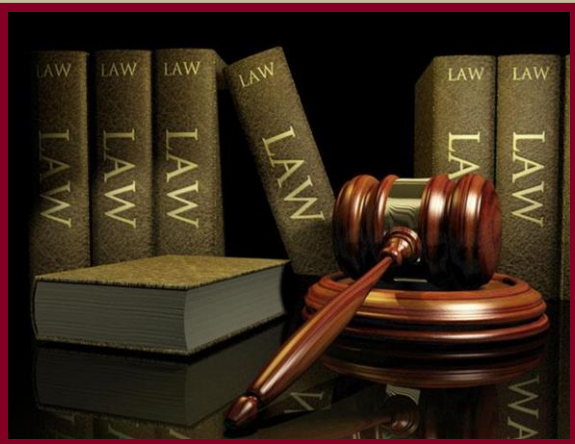
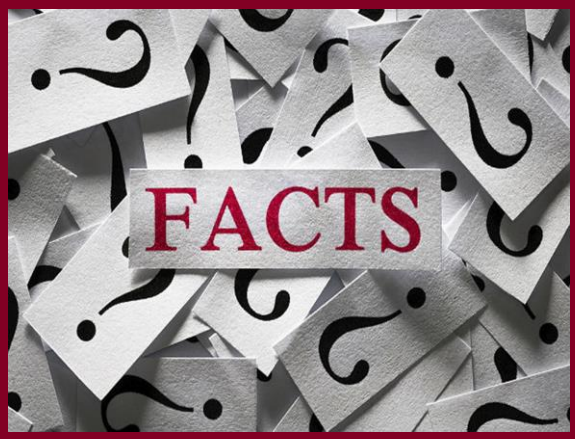
DIVISION OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
Ken Burke, CPA
Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller
Pinellas County, Florida

INVESTIGATION OF AIRPORT RESCUE AND FIREFIGHTING MISUSE OF RESOURCES





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REPORT NO. 2020-11
May 28, 2020

Ken Burke, CPA
CLERK OF THE CIRCUIT COURT AND COMPTROLLER
PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA

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May 28, 2020

Thomas Jewsbury, Airport Director

The Division of Inspector General's Public Integrity Unit has completed an investigation of allegations related to Jeffrey Carrington, Airport Rescue and Firefighting Fire Chief. The complainant alleged the fire chief:

1. Takes home a Pinellas County (County) vehicle on weekdays. **Substantiated**
2. Allows a friend who is a County vendor to park at the Airport fire station (**Substantiated**) and requires firefighters to use a County utility truck to drive the friend/County vendor to the Airport when he has a flight. **Unsubstantiated**
3. Issued new identification cards to firefighters specifying their position, so they can receive discounts from various companies. **Unfounded**
4. Did not discipline three employees who did not report to work for their shift on the Sunday that Hurricane Irma impacted the County in 2017. **Unfounded**
5. Provides preferential treatment to an employee by assigning the employee more overtime compared to other employees. **Unfounded**
6. Changed the uniform vendor to direct business and potentially excess business, to a new vendor that is potentially a friend. **Unfounded**
7. Leaves early on Fridays. **Unsubstantiated**

To determine whether the allegations were substantiated, we reviewed policies, procedures, and appropriate records. We also interviewed staff and other parties, as needed. Our investigation was performed according to the *Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspector General* and *The Florida Inspectors General Standards Manual* from The Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation.

The recommendations presented in this report may not be all-inclusive of areas where improvement may be needed; however, we believe implementation of the recommendations will strengthen the current internal controls.

An Accredited Office of Inspector General

We appreciate the cooperation shown by the staff of the Airport Rescue and Firefighting and Airport Operations Departments during the course of this investigation.

Respectfully Submitted,

Hector Collazo Jr.
Inspector General/Chief Audit Executive

cc: Melissa Dondero, Assistant Inspector General
The Honorable Chairman and Members of the Board of County Commissioners
Barry Burton, County Administrator
Jill Silverboard, County Administrator Chief of Staff
Mark Sprague, Deputy Director of Operations and Facilities
Ken Burke, CPA, Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The Airport Rescue and Firefighting Department (ARFF) operates out of St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport (PIE or Airport). ARFF provides 24-hour aviation fire protection and emergency response services to PIE and neighboring areas. Additionally, ARFF responds to medical emergencies, motor vehicle accidents, rescue calls, and incidents involving hazardous materials. The department consists of 14 full-time staff including 1 fire chief, 3 fire lieutenants, and 10 firefighters.

Allegations

The Division of Inspector General initiated an investigation upon receiving an anonymous complaint through the fraud, waste, and abuse hotline. The complainant alleged Jeffrey Carrington, Airport Rescue and Firefighting Fire Chief:

1. Takes home a Pinellas County (County) vehicle on weekdays.
2. Allows a friend who is a County vendor to park at the Airport fire station and requires firefighters to use a County utility truck to drive the friend/County vendor to the Airport when he has a flight.
3. Issued new identification (ID) cards to firefighters specifying their position, so they can receive discounts from various companies.
4. Did not discipline three employees who did not report to work for their shift on the Sunday that Hurricane Irma impacted the County in 2017.
5. Provides preferential treatment to an employee by assigning the employee more overtime compared to other employees.
6. Changed the uniform vendor to direct business and potentially excess business, to a new vendor that is potentially a friend.
7. Leaves early on Fridays.

Investigative Activity

During the course of the investigation, we performed the following to obtain evidence to conclude on the allegations:

- Reviewed County and Airport policies and procedures
- Conducted surveillance
- Conducted interviews of Airport management, ARFF staff, and Human Resources staff
- Reviewed purchasing card (p-card) and payable transactions
- Analyzed payroll records
- Obtained other applicable records

INVESTIGATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The Division of Inspector General uses the following terminology for the conclusion of fact/finding(s):

- **Substantiated** – An allegation is substantiated when there is sufficient evidence to justify a reasonable conclusion that the allegation is true.
- **Unsubstantiated** – An allegation is unsubstantiated when there is insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegation.
- **Unfounded** – An allegation is unfounded when it is proved to be false or there is no credible evidence to support it.

During the course of the investigation, we determined the following facts to conclude on the allegations:

1. The complainant alleged the fire chief takes home a County vehicle on weekdays. We performed the following:

   - Reviewed applicable County policies and procedures
   - Conducted surveillance
   - Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff

   Per County Administrative Directive 2-13, take-home vehicles are prohibited without an approved and documented exception. We conducted surveillance over a period of four weeks and did not visually verify the fire chief took a vehicle home. During an interview with the investigators, the fire chief admitted to taking home a County vehicle for the last two years. The fire chief did not have approval to take home a County vehicle. Our investigation of the allegation determined it is **substantiated**. See Investigative Finding #1 for additional information.

2. The complainant alleged the fire chief allows a friend who is a County vendor to park at the Airport fire station and requires firefighters to use a County utility truck to drive the friend/County vendor to the Airport when he has a flight. We performed the following:

   - Reviewed applicable County and Airport policies and procedures
   - Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff
   - Reviewed the listing of County vendors
   - Reviewed p-card transactions

   The fire chief admitted during an interview that he allowed an individual to park at the fire station several times in either 2017 or early 2018. A review of County records confirmed the company the individual works for is not a County vendor; however, ARFF had two p-card transactions with the company in late 2017 and early 2018.

The fire chief also admitted to allowing friends and family of ARFF staff to park at the fire station when personally traveling through PIE. Review of policies and procedures and discussions with Airport management confirmed there is no violation for allowing individuals to park at the fire station.

The Pinellas County Driver and Safe Award Policy applies to all entities under the jurisdiction of the Board of County Commissioners. In the section addressing transporting non-employees, the policy states:

> *"The department must get prior approval from the Department of Administrative Services, Purchasing and Risk Management Division to allow non-employees to be passengers…Transporting family members or private citizens is not permitted except as per above."*

During interviews with ARFF staff, we were unable to determine if staff were required to use a utility truck to drive individuals to the Airport. Our investigation of the allegation with regards to the fire chief allowing an individual to park at the station has determined it is **substantiated**, although there is no policy prohibiting this. Our investigation of the allegation with regards to the fire chief requiring ARFF staff to use a County utility truck to drive the individual to the Airport is **unsubstantiated**.

3. The complainant alleged the fire chief issued new ID cards to firefighters specifying their position so they can receive discounts from various companies. We performed the following:

   - Reviewed applicable County and Airport policies and procedures
   - Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff
   - Obtained ID badge templates and badge samples

   Interviews and discussions with ARFF and Airport Operations staff confirmed ARFF staff have four types of ID badges:

   - A standard issue County ID badge that all County employees are issued
   - A Secure Identification Display Area (SIDA) badge that is issued by the Federal Aviation Authority which grants access to secure areas of the Airport
   - An Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) badge confirming certification in the County to provide emergency medical care
   - A Fire Department ID badge identifying them as Airport firefighters

   Only the Fire Department ID badge (as shown to the right) indicates staff work for ARFF. The badge was created at the request of Airport Operations to provide adequate identification in the event of an "all call" or emergency event where staff would need to provide proof of employment to get through roadblocks or checkpoints, such as road

closures during hurricanes. Our investigation of the allegation has determined it is **unfounded**, as evidence proved it to be false.

4. The complainant alleged the fire chief did not discipline three employees who did not report to work for their shift on the Sunday that Hurricane Irma impacted the County in 2017. We performed the following:

    - Reviewed applicable County and Airport policies and procedures
    - Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff
    - Reviewed timesheet records
    - Reviewed Hurricane Irma timelines

    County records and interviews with ARFF staff and Airport management confirmed the County issued an evacuation notice for Zone A on Friday, September 8, 2017. At that time, PIE was ordered to close along with ARFF. Standard protocol requires the fire station close and move the fire trucks and operations to the Public Works facility located at 22211 US Hwy. 19 N., Clearwater.

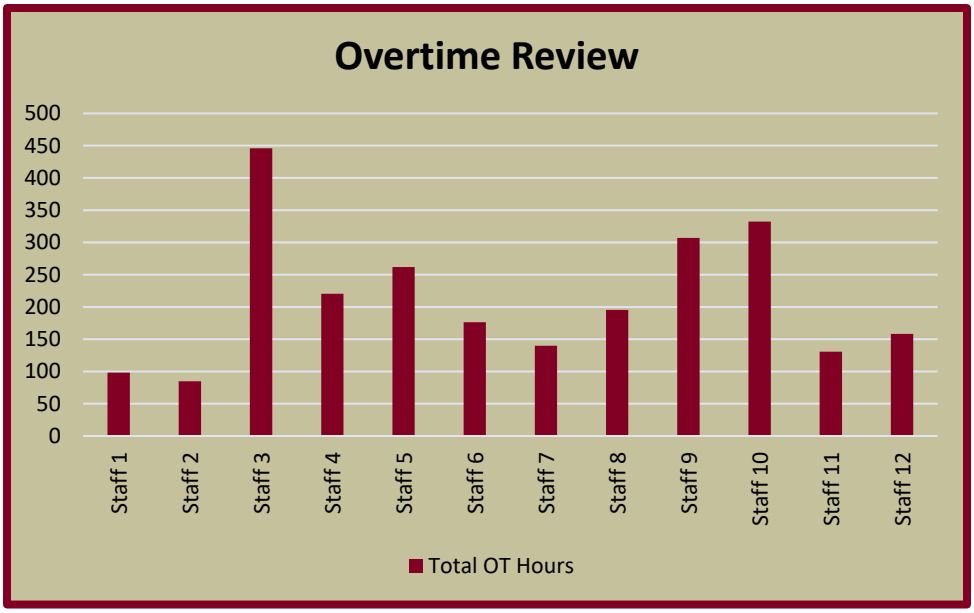
    Due to limited space at the Public Works facility, Airport Operations, including ARFF, were limited to 10 on-site staff. Of the 10 Airport Operations staff, four were ARFF employees: the fire chief and three firefighters who volunteered to go to Public Works. Those individuals were tasked with remaining at the Public Works facility during the storm. After officials indicated it was safe, the ARFF employees convoyed the fire trucks back to the fire station and assisted with reopening the Airport to allow supplies to be delivered if needed.

    An “all call” (a notice issued when all staff are required to report to the fire station) was not issued after the storm as there was appropriate ARFF staff present. Our investigation of the allegation has determined it is **unfounded**, as evidence proved it to be false.

5. The complainant alleged the fire chief provides preferential treatment to an employee by assigning the employee more overtime compared to other employees. We performed the following:

    - Reviewed applicable County and Airport policies and procedures
    - Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff
    - Analyzed overtime payroll records
    - Reviewed overtime tracking spreadsheets

We reviewed overtime payroll records over a two-year period and confirmed there are ARFF staff who receive more overtime than others as shown in the graph below.



We noted one employee, Staff 3 in the graph above, received an average of 255.5 hours more overtime than other ARFF staff since January 2018. However, after interviewing ARFF staff, we determined there are several ARFF staff who are unable to accept overtime due to outside responsibilities and personal reasons. Overtime is usually voluntary and often needed when a firefighter cannot work their scheduled shift and the fire station does not have the required number of firefighters on duty.

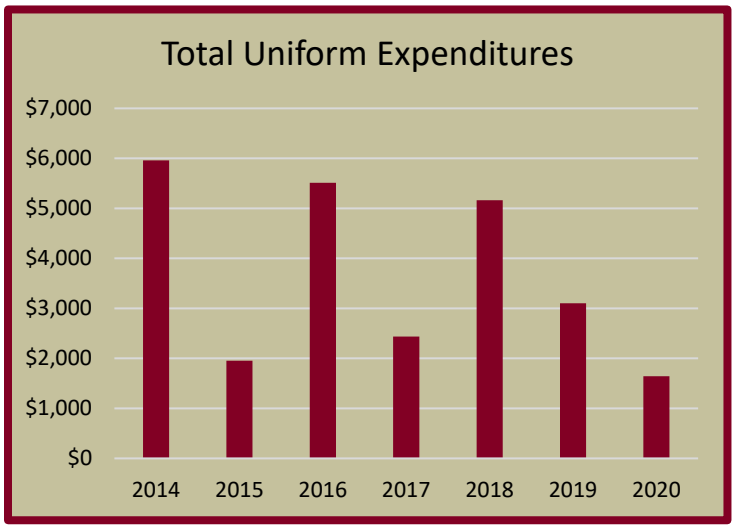
There are several factors that go into assigning overtime including:

- The reason for the overtime for each shift
- The availability of other staff at that time
- The current shift/staff on duty
- The time of day in which overtime was determined necessary

The fire chief maintains spreadsheets to accurately track overtime hours and attempts to adequately make overtime available to those who can accept. Our investigation of the allegation has determined it is **unfounded**, as evidence proved it to be false.

6. The complainant alleged the fire chief changed the uniform vendor to direct business and potentially excess business, to a new vendor that is potentially a friend. We performed the following:

- Reviewed applicable County and Airport policies and procedures
- Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff
- Reviewed and analyzed uniform purchases
- Reviewed and analyzed p-card transactions



A review of uniform purchases and p-card transactions over the last seven years confirmed the fire chief changed uniform vendors in 2018. We analyzed uniform expenditures over that time period and confirmed there was no substantial change in amount spent each year since switching uniform vendors (as shown in the graph to the left).

Additionally, during interviews, we confirmed the fire chief and an ARFF employee recommended the new vendor based on experience with the vendor from previous employment. Neither have a personal relationship with the vendor and we found no evidence a conflict of interest exists. Our investigation of the allegation has determined it is **unfounded**, as evidence proved it to be false.

7. The complainant alleged the fire chief leaves early on Fridays. We performed the following:

   - Reviewed applicable County and Airport policies and procedures
   - Interviewed Airport management and ARFF staff

   During interviews with ARFF staff and Airport management, we confirmed the fire chief is scheduled to work 40 hours Monday through Friday. His schedule can vary based on events, such as fire alarm and sprinkler testing, which usually occurs after hours and requires the fire chief to adjust his daily work hours. Additionally, the fire chief often travels off-site for meetings and other work-related tasks. We confirmed with Airport management the fire chief communicates in the event his schedule needs to be altered; however, these events are not documented. Our investigation of the allegation has determined it is **unsubstantiated** as there was insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegation due to the fire chief's inconsistent schedule.

INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS

1. The Fire Chief Took Home A County Vehicle Without Authorization.

Jeffrey Carrington, ARFF Fire Chief, admitted during an interview with the investigators that he took home a County vehicle for the past two years to respond to after-hours emergencies and calls in a timely and safe manner. In 2019, Mr. Carrington reportedly responded to 33 emergency calls outside his normal working shift. Mr. Carrington stated no one told him he could not take a vehicle home and he was unaware of any County policy about take-home vehicles until the Airport director informed him in January 2020. Mr. Carrington reportedly stopped taking the rescue vehicle home after management notified him of the policy.

As stated in County Administrative Directive 2-13, *Take-Home Vehicle and Equipment*, issued on November 14, 2019:

> *"Take-home vehicles by county employees have been prohibited for more than a decade…No county vehicle or equipment shall be used as a 'take-home' vehicle, except as otherwise provided herein."*

Mr. Carrington did not have written approval from the County Administrator to have a take-home vehicle. The Airport Director stated he was unaware the vehicle was being taken home by the Fire Chief to respond to emergency situations after normal hours. The use of a County vehicle without proper authorization is a violation of the County's Personnel Rule, *D11 - Unauthorized use of County equipment or property*.

When an employee uses a County vehicle in a manner that is not authorized, it puts unnecessary wear and tear on the vehicle and diminishes the public's trust. While no taxpayer money is used to purchase, repair, fuel, or maintain the vehicle, the Airport is still held accountable to adhere to the County's vehicle policies.

We Recommend Management:

A. Administer disciplinary action in accordance with Personnel Rules.

B. Evaluate the necessity of a take-home vehicle for the fire chief and if necessary, submit proper paperwork to the County Administrator seeking an approved exception.

Management Response:

A. Airport Management concurs with the finding and recommendation. The Executive Airport Director provided a verbal reprimand with Chief Carrington over the phone when he

became aware of the situation. Chief Carrington's immediate supervisor, Mark Sprague, Deputy Airport Director, also participated on the call.

B. Airport Management concurs with the finding and recommendation. On May 6, 2020, a written take-home vehicle justification request was submitted to County Administration for consideration authorizing the Airport Fire Chief to use the assigned County vehicle to take home to respond to the Airport after normal working hours.

Division of Inspector General

Ken Burke, CPA
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Pinellas County, Florida

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