

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR SHEILA KUEHL

August 6, 2019

**Exploring Reentry Employment Support for AB 109 Fire Camp Participants**

Although Los Angeles County (County) relies heavily on some inmates to fight fires, it does not provide any path to employment in the Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD) upon their release. Inmate training and labor may be useful, but constant reliance on it creates a disincentive for other County goals, such as decreasing incarceration and encouraging re-entry services. Moreover, the County is missing an opportunity to reduce recidivism by providing meaningful and sustainable linkages to employment.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department (Sheriff) has contracted with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to send our County inmates to Fire Camps operated by the State of California (State) since 2013. Individuals who meet a set of criteria can volunteer to participate in the Fire Camp program. Only those individuals sentenced to County jail under AB 109, or for non-serious, non-violent, or non-sex related crimes, are eligible. The County pays the State \$10 per day to house inmates at the CDCR Fire Camps.

Every six weeks, the Sheriff and LACoFD provide an initial two-week training

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program for male inmates. This training includes classroom learning, physical training, and field training. Inmates receive a certificate of completion following this training, and successful graduates are transferred to a Fire Camp. The graduation rate for this training program is 81 percent. Female inmates are trained by CDCR and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). In addition to the formal training, Fire Camp participants also learn concepts and skills that are valuable to future employment such as teamwork, professionalism, and organizational skills.

The Fire Camp program is one of the only inmate programs that lacks a direct employment linkage upon release, which negatively impacts participation in the program. Criminal records are a barrier to becoming a firefighter in urban areas where Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certifications are required. Some argue that this barrier should exist because firefighters with criminal records could endanger the communities they are meant to serve. This blanket assumption undercuts the intent of programs like Fire Camps, which are meant to support rehabilitation, personal growth, and the chance to start a new life.

The State Legislature has focused on this issue for the past two years. During the 2017-2018 legislative cycle, the legislature passed three bills to create pathways to employment for Fire Camp participants. AB 1812 permits CAL FIRE to issue Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) certifications to Fire Camp graduates who receive a letter of recommendation from the Director of CAL FIRE and who worked towards their high school diploma or equivalent during the training program. AB 2138 limits the authority of licensing boards to deny, revoke, or suspend a professional license based on a criminal conviction that is at least seven years old and not

substantially related to the profession. Lastly, AB 2293 requires Emergency Medical Services agencies to annually report on how criminal convictions impact professional licensure.

The State also created a reentry job training program for Fire Camp participants that provides the necessary fresh start. This training program is called the Ventura Training Center (VTC), and it was included in the State's fiscal year 2018-2019 budget. The VTC is housed in a repurposed fire camp. It provides training to parolees on emergency response, firefighting, and resource conservation. The program is facilitated by a partnership between CDCR, CAL FIRE, California Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC).

The training program lasts approximately 18 months and provides Level I Firefighter Certification. Participants, generally aged 18-25, receive housing, services, and education. Participants also receive a monthly stipend of \$1,905 per month plus \$15 per hour in pay during emergency response. After completion, participants receive job placement assistance with the CCC, CAL FIRE, or the United States Forest Service. These fire departments do not require EMT certification, so a criminal record is not a barrier. The VTC appropriately compensates parolees for their hard, and oftentimes dangerous, labor fighting fires in rural areas. The first cohort graduated in March 2019.

Unfortunately, the VTC is only open to those Fire Camp participants sentenced to state prison and not to our AB 109 population that was sentenced to County jail. This means that, even though the prison and jail inmates are housed at the same Fire Camp facilities, receive the same training, and work alongside one another in fighting and preventing our wildfires, only those inmates sentenced to State prison are eligible for

the reentry training program in Ventura. This significantly disadvantages our County jail inmates, all of whom will be released into our community without much hope of gaining employment. The creation of employment linkages for Fire Camp participants is imperative to furthering our goal of “care first, jail last” and to preparing for and fighting future wildfires in our County.

**I, THEREFORE, MOVE** that the Board of Supervisors direct the Chief Executive Office to coordinate with LACoFD, Sheriff, the Department of Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Services, and the Department of Human Resources, with input from relevant community organizations and state agencies, to report back in sixty (60) days with costs, benefits, and feasibility analyses on:

1. Ways to create employment linkages for Fire Camp participants, including but not limited to:
  - a. Contracting with CAL FIRE to expand the eligibility of the VTC to include County inmates sentenced to jail under AB 109 who participated in the Fire Camp program while in custody; and
  - b. Creating a pilot program to support the transition of County inmates who participated in the Fire Camp program into the role of a Fire Suppression Aid;
2. Identification of any existing County facilities that could be used for the reentry job training programs; and
3. Funding opportunities, including AB 109 funds, which might be utilized to pay for these programs.