Mayor Reynolds and City Council, Do The Right Thing

Staff a company officer and two firefighters at Bethlehem's Northwest Fire Station on all four Platoons.



By Lou Jimenez

Bethlehem Fire Lieutenant and president of Bethlehem Firefighters IAFF Local 735

I've felt a sense of calm lately because I know where I stand. The members of Local 735 elected me to speak for them, and I won't sit quietly through another budget season. For the past year and a half, I've been asking the City to staff a company officer and two firefighters on Engine 9 at the Northwest Fire Station every shift.

On my drive to work, I often find myself thinking, "I hope nobody gets hurt or dies today." I've been a Bethlehem firefighter for 16 years, and I can tell you firsthand that people have died in fires in this city. When a family is standing outside telling us someone is still in the house, I need to hear what they're telling me, see what the fire is doing, and give my crew direction. As a company officer, that work starts the moment I get off the engine.

The administration has pointed out that fires have become less common. The U.S. Fire Administration found that from 2015 through 2024, residential building fires nationwide trended down 8% while deaths in those fires trended up 9%.

What's in our homes has changed, too. In one test by UL's Fire Safety Research Institute, a room with synthetic furnishings reached flashover in 3 minutes and 40 seconds. With natural furnishings, it took 29 minutes and 30 seconds. That's about 88% less time before nearly everything exposed in the room ignited. In separate house tests, carbon monoxide reached dangerous levels in under 7 minutes with polyurethane foam furniture. With older furnishings, it took more than 23 minutes for even the first room to reach that point.

The administration and City Council have heard this from our firefighters for years. Bethlehem residents have spoken up alongside us. Now the study the City paid for with taxpayer dollars backs up what we've been saying all along. It's time for the mayor and Council to act.

That means funding at least four new positions in the 2027 budget, two more than the City has proposed. We need enough company officers to assign one to Engine 9 on each of the four shifts. Families in the Northwest deserve the same crew we already send out of other Bethlehem stations.

I find it offensive when a discussion about staffing turns into criticism of our firefighters for using the sick time or vacation they've earned. If the assigned firefighter is out sick, injured, or on vacation, another firefighter needs to fill that seat. The family calling 911 that night is counting on us to plan for that. The reactive approach by our administration has gone on for decades and needs to end now!

Mayor and Council, you have partners in Local 735. We're the members of the Bethlehem Fire Department who stand our duty each and every day, willing to sacrifice our lives for our neighbors. We're ready to sit down with all of you, the business administrator, and human resources to work on department improvements.

There's more work ahead across the department. Putting three on Engine 9 every shift is the right place to start.

RESEARCH U.S. residential fire trends · Living-room flashover tests · Carbon monoxide tests, §5.8.12 · CPSM Fire & EMS Study · IAFF Bethlehem Staffing Study