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Changes sought in firefighter testing

Author(s): Maggie O'Brien World-Herald staff writer **Date:** January 16, 2010 **Section:** News

Black firefighters want an outside consultant brought in to eliminate bias against minorities. Omaha's black firefighters say the city's tests for recruit classes and promotions are biased against minorities and should be handled by an outside consultant.

Capt. Clifton Wells, president of the Omaha Association of Black Professional Firefighters, said Friday that the tests should be conducted by someone outside the city to help level the playing field for black candidates. The city conducts the tests now, and Wells said those tests are biased against minorities.

Mayor Jim Suttle said Friday that he and the city's **new** human resources director, Richard O'Gara, welcome the opportunity to talk with association members about their concerns.

"I look forward to working with them to help resolve their concerns so that we can ensure that Omaha has the greatest possible diversity in our **Fire** Department," Suttle said in a statement.

Fire Chief Mike McDonnell could not be reached for comment.

Black firefighters have long complained that the city's testing process puts them at a disadvantage because tests administered throughout the hiring process are subjective. Wells said that, in particular, essay questions are unfair because the person scoring the test decides whether the answer is right or wrong.

Of the city's 673 firefighters, fewer than 40 are black, according to figures provided by the black firefighters group. The last four **fire** recruit classes have not included any minority firefighters, Wells said.

"Firefighters across the board ... are feeling the effects of a testing

system that appears to be broken," Capt. Anthony Gaines said.

Applicants for firefighter jobs must take written and physical tests administered by the city's **Fire** and Human Resources Departments. The Human Resources Department scores the tests, and the **fire chief** then selects recruits from the list, said Tom Marfisi, the city's labor relations director.

Firefighters seeking a promotion take only a written test, but the rest of the application process is similar, Marfisi said.

City Councilman Ben Gray, who joined the black firefighters organization at its north Omaha headquarters Friday, said he hopes to work with the city and **Fire** Department to make changes to the testing policies. If that doesn't work, he said, he would consider putting **new** testing policies in an ordinance that would require a council vote.

Gray said changes to the testing system would prevent cheating, favoritism and unfairness throughout the department. Two Omaha firefighters have been accused of helping Papillion firefighter candidates cheat on tests.

Wells said a balanced testing system would help attract more blacks to the **Fire** Department. If children see more black firefighters in their neighborhoods, they might aspire to join the department themselves, he said.

"If they don't see (more of) us," Wells said, "how will they know?"

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