

## II. Fire Services Department (FSD)

8.51 We received submissions from three streams of disciplined staff serving in FSD - fireman, ambulanceman and control as well as from the department. While there are differences in the work content of the three streams, we have dealt with submissions from all streams and from the department together, indicating particular differences or conditions where necessary.

### **Pay**

8.52 A submission expressed concern that the Pay Level Survey concentrated more on the police than the other disciplined services which might have similar or greater differences from the rest of the civil service, e.g. in conditioned working hours. A number of submissions were unhappy with the disparity between fire services and police that had been created by the introduction of the disciplined services pay scale in 1979. In the officer grade, FSD recruits started two points lower than their police counterparts. For the rank and file, it was pointed out that firemen started at three points lower on the pay scale than their police constable (PC) counterparts; that the maximum point of the scale was four points lower than the police; and that the fire services did not enjoy the incremental jumps given to PCs in the first nine years of the latter's career. We were presented with a variety of arguments as to why these disparities should be removed for both officers and rank and file. For example, it was argued that a fireman's responsibility to fight fires and rescue people so as to protect their lives and property was as important as the police responsibility (as perceived by the submission) "to maintain law and order so that citizens can live peacefully". Moreover, we were told that the volume and complexity of a fireman's job had increased considerably with the development of Hong Kong since 1979 and now justified the removal of the disparity. It was also put to us strongly that the disparity in starting pay for officers gives the police a considerable advantage in recruitment by being able to select those from the upper bracket of the educationally qualified for appointment to officer ranks while also recruiting those with the minimum qualifications for officer entry to the rank and file for possible in-service promotion to officer at a later date. It was explained to us that in contrast to the police recruitment position, FSD has been unable to recruit sufficient numbers of officers and in particular has a 15% shortfall of Station Officers who are required to man all fire appliances.

8.53 Apart from pay disparity with the police, it was explained to us that recruitment problems also arose from the need for high standards of physical performance, long and irregular working hours, and the hazardous nature of the job. It was argued that pay rates should be improved in order to attract recruits of high calibre. We were told that setting higher pay for rank and file recruits to FSD could attract men with higher educational qualifications who might be considered

for in-service appointment to the officer grade after several years' working experience, and thus help to remedy the critical shortage of officers. A variation on this view was that with raised entry qualifications, direct recruitment of officers should end and that all officer ranks should be filled by promotion from the rank and file as is done in other countries.

8.54 We received two other views on the pay scale itself. It was submitted that in the ambulance stream it takes rank and file ambulancemen "many years" to be promoted to non-commissioned officer ranks and that the gap between the maximum salary points of non-commissioned officers (DPS(R) 37 or \$10,050) and the basic rank of the officer grade (DPS(O) 37 or \$31,865) was too great and should be narrowed. It was argued that it was undesirable to create more pay scales and that consideration should be given to combining the DPS(O) with DPS(R) or "to combine these two pay scales with the MPS". A specific proposal put to us broadly, without detailed argument, included the police rank and file, as follows :-

<u>Rank</u>	<u>MPS</u>
Principal Fireman/ Ambulanceman/Station Sergeant	28 - 32
Senior Fireman/ Ambulanceman Sergeant	22 - 27
Fireman/Ambulanceman/ PC	14 - 21*

\* with MPS points 22 and 23 maintained as long service increments.

8.55 Another submission expressed disappointment at the lowering of the ambulance stream's pay scale relative to the firemen, by the Standing Commission in 1979. It was believed that this might have been done on the basis of incomplete information since consultative channels were not comprehensive at the time. We were told that ambulance services staff wished to see their pre-1979 parity with fire services staff restored. We were also told that a review of the present situation has been pending since 1979 while the reorganisation and consolidation period of the revised ambulance gradings was completed.

8.56 We were informed that an international survey of fire services salaries in 15 countries published in 1988, showed that in US\$ terms, the Hong Kong fireman was the fifth lowest paid. We were also told that compared with the other disciplined services, FSD staff were paid less in terms of income per conditioned hour, although this was based on 60 hours for FSD and 48 hours for the other disciplined services (which differs from what we have been told in other disciplined services' submissions).

8.57 It was proposed that, in determining the remuneration of FSD staff, compensatory factors including work stress, adverse working conditions, the hazardous nature of work, the effect of emergency work on the psychological and physiological well-being of staff, long working hours, comparatively low pay, organisational and work restrictions on staff's personal, family and social life, the increasing responsibility and workload of staff, and recruitment problems should be taken into account.

8.58 Two broad alternative methods were put to us as equitable ways to establish rates of pay for FSD. The first was to base emoluments on a realistic and fair comparison with fire services in other countries. The second proposed a similar comparison, but with the other disciplined services, particularly the police, and with special account being taken of recruitment problems in FSD.

8.59 The majority of submissions concentrated on either the disparity in pay and arguments on why this should be removed and pay increased, or on some form of modification to the pay scale. Only a few comments were made on machinery for pay determination, one view supporting the establishment of a consultative committee to cover all the disciplined services. In summary, the submissions on pay which we received all took up the general theme that FSD work and responsibilities had increased to such an extent since 1979 as to warrant an improvement in pay. As the development of duties and responsibilities was a prime factor in the arguments and a significant component of all submissions, we give an account of this topic below.

#### **Development of duties and responsibilities**

8.60 Most of the submissions we received emphasised the increase in scope and complexity of the job due to recent developments. The increasing number, size, height and complexity of high-rise industrial and commercial buildings together with developments of transport systems including road tunnels and the Mass Transit Railway (MTR), were contributing to the workload, responsibilities and physical demands on the strength and endurance of firemen. It was pointed out that in addition to maintaining a high standard of physical fitness and stamina, firemen were required to know more and use more sophisticated technology and techniques in the effective discharge of their duties. A number of submissions informed us of the type of training which firemen have to undergo and the professional type of skills which they have to acquire in order to do their job.

8.61 We were made aware that all firemen had to be trained in chemical handling, radioactivity detection and decontamination procedures as a result of the increasing use and transport of dangerous chemicals and radioactive materials, and the increasing number of potentially hazardous installations in the territory. It was also pointed out that

with the advent of the MTR, teams of firemen had had to be trained specially to work in the pressurised atmospheres needed for construction work. We were informed that dealing with fires in pressurised atmospheres was particularly dangerous : special breathing mixtures had to be used and periodical medical examinations and other tests were required to reduce the risks as much as possible.

8.62 We were given figures to show how population growth with the associated increase in social, economic, commercial and industrial activities had increased the number of turnouts to fires. The enactment of new legislation which the FSD was required to enforce, and the revision of the Code of Practice for minimum fire service installations and equipment has further increased its responsibilities and workload. In comparing 1979 with 1987 for example, the number of fire calls had increased from 13,107 to 20,889 (up by 59.4%); special service calls from 5,630 to 12,846 (up by 128.17%). Similarly a comparison of licensing volume between 1979 and 1987 showed an increase from 3,567 to 4,758 in dangerous goods premises (up by 33.4%), and 2,426 to 3,009 in dangerous goods vehicles (up by 24%). We were also told that the number of ambulance calls has increased from 199,152 (average of 546 calls a day) in 1979 to 401,037 (average of 1,099 calls a day) in 1987, i.e. a 101% increase. The number of patients served also showed an increase from 264,614 in 1979 to 510,048 in 1987, a 93% increase. This increase in demand has resulted in a corresponding growth in the number of fire stations, ambulance depots, fire appliances, vehicles and equipment. It was maintained, however, that the growth in strength has lagged behind the increased workload over the years, which resulted in increased workload overall for all the staff. These increases, together with the growing shortage of officers meant, for example, that Station Officers/Senior Station Officers had to work two to three additional shifts per month as a short term measure, and that training courses had had to be cut.

8.63 Submissions explained how growing public concern for environmental issues and risks, such as the overcrowded conditions of discotheques, the living conditions of bed space apartments, and installation of potentially hazardous industries had also increased workloads. It was said that the public were generally more aware of fire safety and that this resulted in more complaints about obstructions and excessive storage of dangerous goods.

8.64 We were told that modern technology had brought about great changes in various industries and correspondingly large increases in the responsibilities of fire protection officers. The complicated designs of modern high-rise buildings, new designs in fire service installations, sophisticated fire alarm and detection systems, and the many new dangerous goods used by industry were all examples of the problems which officers had to face in their daily work. To cope with these difficulties and perform their work effectively, officers had to constantly keep abreast of new developments and enhance their professional

knowledge.

8.65 Because of the great increase in fire protection activities, much of the work of the Fire Protection Bureau had been decentralised to Regions in 1981, and further necessary devolution of certain fire protection duties to operational personnel at fire stations in 1986 placed additional responsibilities on the operational staff and made their jobs more complicated.

8.66 It was pointed out that the centralisation of regional fire controls in 1979 had required a complete change in work procedures in mobilisation and communication, and control staff experienced added pressure as the new system permitted and required a faster and more accurate response. They were also required to adapt themselves to more sophisticated equipment which needed greater alertness and concentration and better knowledge of Fire and Ambulance Commands.

8.67 We were informed that the FSD's fire appliance fleet had changed considerably both in quantity and complexity and that accordingly the workshop staff who were responsible for the upkeep of appliances had substantially greater responsibilities.

8.68 Our attention was also drawn to the requirement to reach the site in 10 minutes travel time in response to 95% of emergency ambulance calls in the urban area introduced in 1986; the introduction of the ambulance aid motor cycle service; the expansion of ambulance service, e.g. to outlying islands; and the public demand for a better quality of service, all of which brought added responsibilities to ambulance personnel. It was pointed out that ambulancemen had to acquire a high degree of professional skills in order to use effectively modern communication devices and rescue apparatus and to enable them to make correct operational decisions. At the scene of incidents we were told ambulance officers had to direct and control ambulances and Auxiliary Medical Services personnel in treating casualties. It was submitted that ambulancemen had to perform obnoxious duties as they had to handle people who were seriously injured or ill, and constantly risked exposure to infectious diseases some of which might not be apparent until some time after thus also putting their families at risk. It was further submitted that ambulancemen suffered low social prestige, as many people in Hong Kong were superstitious and treated ambulancemen as akin to undertakers as harbingers of misfortune.

#### **Dangers and stress**

8.69 All submissions pointed out that the nature of emergency work and the exposure to life threatening situations created a unique occupational stress to FSD staff. Factors contributing to the work stress of staff were a high sense of awareness that staff decisions and performance could mean the

difference between life and death; responsibility to the public; exposure to a high degree of danger; the need to make immediate decisions at the scene of emergencies; prolonged tension while on duty as staff had to be ready for immediate response to calls; sudden intense physical activity in responding to emergency calls; and fear of possibility of contracting infectious diseases, especially for ambulance staff.

8.70 All submissions emphasised the stress brought about by the sheer physical danger of the fireman's job, and the exceptional physical effort it required. Firemen were required to perform strenuous continuous work at incidents under adverse conditions in intense heat with high humidity, extreme cold or sudden temperature changes which resulted in physical exhaustion and fatigue. This type of physical work was exhausting and dangerous. In high-rise buildings, firemen did not use lifts but instead had to walk up staircases carrying some 15 kilograms of breathing apparatus and an equal weight of fire fighting equipment and do so repeatedly until the fire was put out and victims rescued. They were also exposed to dangerous substances, toxic gases, and chemicals at fire scenes particularly in industrial buildings where unknown risks were frequently encountered, e.g. unregistered storage of dangerous goods. We were told that the danger inherent in fire fighting was taken into account by insurance companies which refused to accept firemen for life insurance unless they were willing to pay a much higher premium than normal. For example, we were informed of one company which quoted a monthly premium for group accident/life insurance policies of \$7 per unit for FSD staff and \$4 for policemen.

8.71 We were told of a number of tragedies and injuries suffered by firemen in their efforts to save lives and protect property. Over the past decade, seven members of the fire services have died in the line of duty and 772 have been injured in fires and special services, of whom a number could no longer perform operational duties while some have had to take compulsory early retirement. We were told for example, that of the total of 105 injuries suffered in fires and special services in 1986 and 1987, 41 injuries (54.7%) were suffered in fighting fires in multi-storey factory buildings where there were risks of inhaling poisonous gases or chemical explosions. We were also told of firemen who were killed in an explosion of a dangerous goods store; during a landslide rescue; and in a MTR station during construction.

8.72 It was stated that the immediate response to alarms was another stress-inducing factor. Upon receipt of an alarm, staff had to leave the station within 40 seconds no matter what they were doing (resting, eating, washing) and be in a state of full awareness. Such a sudden response produces a rush of adrenalin and acceleration of the heart rate which repeated over time can be harmful to health. Failure to meet the response time could also lead to disciplinary action which was another source of stress on the staff. On average, firemen



will experience call-outs in every 24-hour period of duty, which means that the stress from this cause was particularly damaging to them. We were also told that ambulancemen were equally subject to the effects of stress because of a much higher turn-out rate.

8.73 It was represented that the daily work of the operational staff was a heavy tax upon their health and strength. Local statistics indicated that besides having a much higher likelihood of contracting fatal diseases and cancer, staff of FSD also suffered a much higher work injury rate than other civil servants. The latest comparable figures from 1986 showed that the FSD injury rate was 33.21 per 1000 compared with 19.73 per 1000 in all other government departments. Common occupational diseases included back, knee and neck pain, heart disease, disorders with the respiratory system, rheumatism and arthritis. Submissions contended that the operational staff were far more likely to suffer from these occupational diseases than other disciplined services staff because of the high physical exertion and the hazardous nature of their work.

8.74 It was submitted that although the actual work of ambulance personnel was different from that of firemen, a comparable level of stress and personal hazard was inherent in ambulance work as ambulance staff were required to work on shift duties and perform on call duties outside normal working hours, were subject to strict discipline and required to attend emergency incidents frequently. We were also told that the introduction of the 24-hour coverage system extended the responsibility of an Ambulance Officer on night shift from a depot to a geographical division and for that period, he was in command of all ambulance operations in that area. It was also pointed out that fire services members, and in particular ambulance personnel, were often required to handle people suffering from mental disorders, many of whom were said to have violent dispositions. Moreover, ambulance staff were particularly exposed to the risk of communicable diseases such as viral hepatitis and submissions told us that because of longer incubation periods they might also unknowingly pass the diseases onto their families.

8.75 We received representations about the high degree of stress suffered by control staff who provide support to fire and ambulance personnel in mobilisation and communication. They did not have to deal physically with emergency incidents but come under major work stress due to the high nervous energy demands and urgent requirements of the job where mistakes cannot be afforded. We were told that control staff have to make important mobilisation decisions in accordance with prescribed procedures within 35 seconds of receiving a call. Moreover, staff worked for long periods of confinement in the Control Centre, nine hours on the day shift and 15 hours on the night shift with irregular meal breaks which might always be interrupted by the need to deal with emergency calls. We were told that staff are under stress through having to deal

continuously with emergency calls of increasing volume (see statistics on fire and special calls in paragraph 8.62 above) and where every second saved in the mobilisation process could help in saving life and property. We were told that "duty conscious staff frequently recall incidents to see if they are perfectly performed and this strain persists even if they are off duty". We were given some statistics on control staff wastage. Of 42 staff who have left since 1979, 39 retired early or resigned and only three retired at the normal age of 55. We were also told that 46 of the 74 Senior Firemen/Firewomen (Control) recruited between 1979 and 1986, have left the service.

8.76 A further point brought up was that by nature of their duty, FSD staff had to be in the front line and in close contact with the public. They were subject to close public scrutiny and complaints. It was pointed out that although the majority of these complaints were not substantiated, the internal investigation procedures added to staff stress. Moreover FSD staff were increasingly having to deal with members of the public, queries from pressure groups, district boards and OMELCO. This new dimension in public relations added to their work pressure.

#### **Hours of work**

8.77 It was explained that the conditioned hours of Hong Kong firefighters were the longest among all developed nations. In UK, USA and Japan, firemen were said to work a 48 hour week and those in New Zealand and Australia work a 42 hour week whereas local firemen had to work a 60 hour week, which was also the longest among the disciplined services in Hong Kong. It was further submitted that firemen were often required to work continuously for a prolonged period of time before they were given short breaks for rest or being relieved. Operational firemen and ambulancemen are required to work 24 hours shifts which upset the biological clock and affected their health, and also their social and family lives because they could be on shift at weekends and on public holidays. We were told that the shift system also made it difficult for staff to pursue further studies in the evening which in turn, affected their chances of improving themselves and their prospects.

8.78 It was also put to us that FSD operational staff cannot enjoy statutory public holidays because of their hours of work and do not receive any compensatory leave in return.

8.79 It was suggested that the time required for roll call and inspection before each period of duty should be recognised and paid for, and that consideration should be given to a phased reduction of firemen's hours of work to a range between 44 and 48 hours per week in line with most of the rest of the civil service. It was proposed that compensatory allowance should be given for the extra hours worked if staff shortages made the reduction in hours impractical. Submissions did not however press for the 24-hour shift (currently worked 35 times



in a 14-week cycle) to be abandoned.

8.80 We were given the particular example of operational Assistant Divisional Officers (ADOs) who have to perform the work of a Marshalling Officer (whose primary duties are to control and deploy all fire services appliances, vehicles, equipment, supplies and staff in a major incident) on a rota basis in addition to their normal working hours. This duty tour lasts for 24 hours without time-off in lieu. After such a tour, ADOs have to work normal office hours which means that if they are called out for marshalling duties, they could be working for a continuous stretch of 32 hours.

8.81 Submissions pointed out that ambulancemen were often required to work overtime and had to respond to calls during lunch hours for which they were not compensated. It was said that they were subject to rigid restrictions in their application for Disciplined Services Special Allowance (DSSA). DSSA was seen as an overtime payment and the basis of calculation i.e. single time instead of time and a half (the standard overtime rate in the civil service) was criticised as too low. It was also stated that in most cases, staff were only given time-off which they considered unsatisfactory. We were also made aware that since 1986, designated ambulance depots had to be attended all year round, 24 hours a day, by Ambulance Officers on duty roster. As a result, these Ambulance Officers can enjoy only one Sunday off per month and have to spend two nights per week away from home on duty. Senior Ambulance Officers are required to perform regular on-call duty once every three days in addition to normal duty hours.

8.82 It was explained that control staff had to work long periods in the Control Centre i.e. nine hours for day, and 15 hours for night shifts. They had irregular meal times and only 20 minutes were allowed for meal breaks in three successive shifts which could be interrupted if staff had to attend to emergencies.

### **Restrictions**

8.83 Our attention was drawn to the fact that FSD staff were subject to strict disciplinary restraints which applied even when they were off duty. They had to wear uniform and meet a high standard of appearance and personal bearing and behaviour.

8.84 It was also stated that senior officers were even more restricted because of their continuous duty system. Apart from being engaged on day time work, they were required to be continuously available on-call to take command of important incidents and therefore, their movements were restricted to the area under their responsibility. They did not have regular off-duty time except annual leave or mutually arranged leave for a short period covered by another officer. Other disruptions were mentioned to us in relation to Senior

Divisional/Divisional Officers. They were required to be continuously available for duty and to live in post-tied quarters. This meant that they might be called out at night to attend incidents in their area and, on transfer, had to move quarters which entailed rearranging their children's schooling and other disruptions to family life. As described in paragraph 8.77 above, irregular hours and shift work also affected officers' social and family lives, particularly since they had to work on public holidays. We were also told that shift duty prevented men from having a normal social life, alienated them from their friends and relations, and reduced the amount of time they could spend with their families thus affecting the upbringing of their children.

8.85 Submissions pointed out that firemen and ambulancemen were required to maintain a high standard of physical fitness and they had to undergo annual physical fitness tests. Failure to attain a satisfactory standard might affect their chances of being confirmed to the permanent establishment or their promotion prospects. We were told that the need to maintain a high standard of physical fitness effectively constituted a restriction as many staff had to undertake fitness training during off-duty hours. It was pointed out that by reason of operational necessity the physical standard required by the FSD was substantially higher than that of other disciplined services departments. We were told that physical fitness assessment for policemen stopped at 50 years of age while in the FSD it had to be taken by men up to 55 years of age.

#### **Conditions of service**

8.86 The major point made to us regarding conditions of service concerned the requirement for staff to retire at 55 instead of 60 years old under the new pension scheme for the civil service. A number of submissions said that this earlier age of retirement meant that firemen would lose five years of pension benefits, which, it was apparently considered, the enhancement available did not compensate for fully; the right to live in quarters; home purchase allowance (HPA); education allowances; medical benefits; and other civil service benefits. It was argued that by having to retire at 55, rank and file staff would suffer a loss of five years' HPA in relation to the rest of the civil service. It was therefore proposed to us that rank and file staff should be either eligible for HPA until the age of 60; or that HPA should be raised so that five years' allowance would be the same as 10 years' allowance paid to the other civil servants of similar remuneration; or that a HPA quota should be set for the disciplined services rank and file so that staff of 20 years' service could be eligible.

8.87 Another area of concern brought to our attention was that firemen had to work on statutory public holidays (according to shift duties) for which they received no compensation. A further point was that, unlike other civil service grades, FSD operational staff could not take leave in half-day units. It was also suggested that the general rule

regarding sick leave in the civil service, i.e. that sick leave not exceeding two working days could be taken without producing a medical certificate should also be applied to the FSD where such certificates are required for shorter periods.

### **Morale**

8.88 We did not receive many explicit statements on morale as such. However, it was made clear in all the submissions which we received that the problem of recruitment was of great concern, particularly in view of the present under-establishment of the department and its increasing workload and responsibilities, and that this situation could be improved through an increase in pay that recognised the increased complexity and volume of FSD's work since the situation was last reviewed in 1979.

8.89 Finally, we would like to emphasise that none of the submissions suggested that any stream in FSD would not fulfil its responsibilities to save lives and protect property. All submissions reflect a pride in the ability and the efficiency of the department and staff in coping with developments over the past decade and their capacity to provide a wide diversity of emergency services to Hong Kong.

### **III. Correctional Services Department (CSD)**

#### **Pay**

8.90 We received a substantial number of submissions representing that pay levels were too low but, other than to suggest that pay levels should equal those of the police, none that made any specific proposal for change, on the basis, we were told, that most CSD staff would expect to be treated no better or worse than the other disciplined services. However, in addition to the view that the pay levels set in 1979 had not adequately recognised the special factors that affect the work and lives of correctional services staff, we were made very much aware of a general concern that the present remuneration did not adequately compensate staff for the increased workload since 1978-79. This was attributable in part to successive influxes of Vietnamese refugees and also to the very great development of industrial training, educational and rehabilitation programmes and aftercare services. Other factors stressed in a number of submissions were the dangers, pressures and discomfort which staff have to face in the execution of their duties; and the disruption caused by work requirements to social and family life. (These three aspects are dealt with separately in following sections.)

8.91 Almost all submissions we received that touched on pay matters focussed largely on the disparities which exist among the disciplined services and expressed dissatisfaction with the present differentials. The submissions which took a broader view of pay disparity argued that either the differentials should either be removed or at the very least,