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## County grand jury issues scathing report on fire departments

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A Santa Clara County civil grand jury on Wednesday called for a wholesale rethinking of fire departments and emergency responses, arguing that sending firefighters to what are now mostly medical calls is outdated and wasteful.

A report by the watchdog panel found that 70 percent of fire department calls are medical emergencies, and just 4 percent are fire-related. But even so, firefighters respond as if they are heading to a fire, sending a crew of three or more on a truck or engine costing an average of \$500,000 -- five times the cost of an ambulance.

Typically only one of the three arriving firefighters has medical training, the report said. That creates a "mismatch between service needed and service provided," with fire departments deploying "personnel who are overtrained to meet the need" -- that is, paramedics also trained as firefighters.

"Taxpayers can no longer afford to fund the status quo," the report said. "Using firefighter-paramedics in firefighting equipment as first responders to all non-police emergencies is unnecessarily costly when less expensive paramedics on ambulances possess the skills needed to address the 96 percent of calls that are not fire-related."

The report comes as firefighters face growing scrutiny for six-figure salaries and pensions. City officials say mounting costs are driving them to insolvency, forcing layoffs and cuts to popular programs such as libraries.

Santa Clara County and city officials

have 90 days to formally respond to the report.


County spokeswoman Gwen Mitchell said the county, whose Emergency Medical Services Agency governs response protocols for most of the county, would not comment before issuing a formal response.

But San Jose fire Chief Willie McDonald questioned whether private ambulance services can do the job faster and cheaper than firefighters. He argued that because they already are heavily staffed and widely deployed to tamp down fires, firefighters can respond more quickly, and it's more cost-effective to give them paramedic training. An ambulance company would have to hire more medics to meet the firefighters' response time targets, he said, and those costs would be passed on to patients and their insurers.

"We have the personnel, and the service is compatible with advanced life support," McDonald said.

The report sharply criticized politically influential firefighter unions, accusing them of stymieing efforts to "think outside the box" to protect jobs. It argues that schedules allowing firefighters to live far outside the communities they serve "may unintentionally foster a culture of insensitivity to residents' sentiments" and a perception of being "entitlement-minded."

"Unions are more interested in job preservation than in providing the right mix of capabilities at a reasonable cost, using scare tactics to influence the public," the report said. "The result is a clear impression of firefighters as self-serving rather than




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