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Fraud Hotline Report: Firefighters used City water to wash personal trucks

Report



The Auditor's Office found evidence of wasted resources when investigating a tip about a firefighter washing a personal vehicle on City property. We referred findings and recommendations to the Fire Bureau.

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Investigated by: Elizabeth Pape

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The Fire Bureau agreed with our recommendation to revise its policies but said that washing personal vehicles with City water was an entrenched behavior and broadly accepted by the Bureau even though it is prohibited by Citywide administrative rules.

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Tip to the Fraud Hotline

Tip



The Auditor's Office operates a Fraud Hotline to receive tips about suspected fraud, waste, and abuse of position.

A June 2021 tip alleged that a firefighter:

- Used City resources for personal use
- Performed personal business during working hours

Investigation Findings



The firefighter washed a personal vehicle using City water.

Human Resources Administrative Rule 4.09 prohibits personal use of City resources, and water at a City facility is a City resource. The firefighter acknowledged he washed his personal vehicle using City water. His personal vehicle matched the vehicle in the tip, and he was on-duty the night referenced in the tip. The firefighter's supervisor also confirmed that the firefighter was working that day and drove a vehicle as described in the tip.

The Bureau allowed firefighters to use City water for personal use.

The firefighter, the supervisor, and the Bureau's Human Resources Business Partner all confirmed that it has been an accepted practice for firefighters to wash their personal vehicles at fire stations using City water.

Though managers may view this use of City water to wash personal vehicles as insignificant, the Bureau must uphold its responsibility to enforce City rules and consider other aspects of this type of violation, including:

Public perception: A member of the public was concerned enough about the misuse of City resources to report it. The Bureau risks appearing indifferent to legitimate compliance issues by trivializing them. It also risks the appearance of using a double standard to assess conduct, because it is unlikely the Bureau would ignore a community member who attempted to wash a personal vehicle at a fire station.

Multiplier effect: Any single instance of washing a vehicle may seem insubstantial, but it has the potential to be a widespread practice among hundreds of employees if condoned by managers. This appears to be happening at the Fire Bureau.

Resource conservation: Portland is not experiencing serious drought conditions, but most of the Western United States is. People are aware of water consumption and the need for conservation. Washing a vehicle at a fire station is a public act that appears wasteful of City resources.

The Bureau should use this opportunity to define and provide guidance on what is permitted and what is not for both managers and firefighters.

The firefighter was not off-task during working hours.

The tipster reported observing a firefighter conducting personal business while on duty at a station. The supervisor at the station explained that a firefighters' 24-hour workday includes time for routine and special tasks, training, exercise, and downtime between calls. He said firefighters are allowed to take care of personal activities as long as they are available to take calls.

Our Recommendations



1. The Bureau should adopt a policy to clarify what is and is not considered personal use of City resources.
2. The Bureau should share information about the policy with staff.
3. If a supervisor observes staff violating the policy, the supervisor should intervene to correct the conduct. If employees repeat the violations, the supervisor should contact the Bureau's Human Resource Business Partner and begin a disciplinary process.
4. The Bureau and/or Human Resources should investigate the conduct identified in this report to determine whether discipline is warranted.

Response from the Fire Bureau



The Bureau said that it would draft a policy clarifying what is and is not personal use, including washing personal vehicles. However, it also said that washing personal vehicles at fire stations using City water is an entrenched and broadly accepted practice. The Bureau said it will work with Human Resource's Labor Relations staff if a new policy requires bargaining. Once the new policy is complete, the Bureau will implement procedures for training and monitoring.

About Portland's Fraud Hotline

The Auditor's Office administers the Fraud Hotline to enable the public and City employees to confidentially report suspected fraud, waste and abuse of position by or against the City. The Hotline also serves to identify and prevent losses of City funds and act as a deterrent to fraud, waste and abuse of position. Hotline tips can be submitted online at www.PortlandFraudHotline.com or by phone by calling 866-342-4148.

When the Auditor's Office finds waste, inefficiency or abuse of position via the Hotline, it is required by law to notify the Portland City Council of the findings. This report, which is delivered to the City's mayor and commissioners, serves as that notice. It is also released publicly to inform about substantiated Hotline tips.