

More people of color, women needed in city Fire Department



**WILLIE J. LIGHTFOOT
ERNEST FLAGLER**

GUEST ESSAYISTS

The Rochester Fire Department is privileged to serve a diverse community in which minorities make up more than 50 percent of the population. Yet, within the department itself, Rochester's minority groups are vastly underrepresented.

Of the 519 uniformed personnel currently serving in the department, only 33 are African American and only 31 are Hispanic. The disparity is even more glaring in the elevated ranks. Of the 125 firefighters who serve in ranks higher than firefighter, only three are members of a minority group. In gender equality, the department does not fare any better: Only seven members of the department are women, and the highest-ranking female firefighter is a lieutenant.

There is no reason why the RFD's composition can't better reflect the community it serves, and there is every reason why it should. Not only does fairness demand greater representation of women and minorities in the department at all levels, but ensuring diversity among the ranks of public servants serves



File photo

Rochester firefighters, silhouetted against a late afternoon sky in 1996, pull shingles off a Wooden Street building damaged by fire.

to deepen the public's trust in those on whom they must rely. By increasing diversity among firefighters, the RFD will strengthen its relationship with this diverse community. Recruitment and advancement of minorities and women in the RFD must be made a priority.

A critical first step is more aggressive recruitment of city residents, including the employment of full-time recruiters. The city also needs to consider measures such as awarding extra points to city residents on entry and promotional exams. A career in the RFD is an excellent opportunity, and we believe that there exists within the city an untapped source of qualified candidates. We do not need to look outside the community for

recruitment.

The RFD may be able to adopt hiring practices used by the Rochester Police Department, which has seen far more success in its efforts to diversify. As the result of a consent decree, the RPD is required to hire one minority candidate for every three non-minority candidates. The RPD uses a two-list system, whereby the civil service list from which they hire is split into minority and non-minority lists.

Rochester cannot allow itself to lag behind other upstate cities that have made strides in diversifying their fire departments. In the Buffalo Fire Department, close to 25 percent of firefighters are African American.

Some progress has been made here in Rochester, but not nearly

enough. The administration of Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. is to be commended for creating an environment conducive to discussions on diversity within city departments. Indeed, in 1999, Mayor Johnson appointed Rochester's first African-American fire chief.

It is important that we not lose momentum with the change in administration. We applaud Mayor Robert Duffy for striving to bring this community together. He has shown that he is willing to make tough decisions to do what is right for this city. We hope he will support efforts to increase the number of women and minorities serving in the RFD as part of his commitment to improving the lives of all community members.

The importance of promoting diversity among RFD members cannot be overstated. We in no way are attacking the department. We, too, are proud members of the RFD. However, we are stating the facts, and the facts are disappointing. We believe that these facts warrant discussion and action by the administration. We recognize that this is a process that will take time. That is why a dedicated and concerted effort needs to start now. □

Lightfoot is a member, Genesis Chapter, International Association of Black Professional Firefighters, and a Monroe County legislator representing District 27; Flagler is president, Genesis Chapter, International Association of Black Professional Firefighters.