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How firefighters fan the flames of fear

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What happens if your city dares to cut the fire department budget?

Easy: Children will die. Maybe even yours.

That is the message of Toronto's firefighters, who have been waging a shameless fear campaign against the poor wretches who are trying to rein in costs at City Hall.

Those wretches are no match for Ed Kennedy, the president of the firefighters' association, who has been posing in front of burned-out houses to make his point that people probably died because of the firefighting jobs that went unfilled last year. More cutbacks would "definitely impact the response times," he warned. Firefighters have been showing up at City Hall in T-shirts with the slogan "Seconds Count." They've also been busy polishing their halos. They recently made heartwarming news when they donated children's toys to a family whose house (and Christmas presents) had caught fire on Christmas Day. The sobbing family thanked them on the air.

A powerful combination of fear-mongering and hero worship has made Canada's fire departments largely immune to budget cuts. As a consequence, the citizens are getting hosed.

Thanks to better building materials and awareness, the number of fires in the United States, for example, has plunged in recent years – more than 40 per cent since the 1970s, according to the U.S. Fire Prevention Association. But the number of professional firefighters has *increased* 40 per cent.

We like to think of firefighters as brave men who rush into burning buildings and risk their lives to save others. And so they do – once in a while. These days, the overwhelming majority of their work is

responding to medical emergencies – many of them non-life-threatening, such as picking up elderly people who have fallen down. Of course we have EMS for that. But firefighters have to justify their existence. So they race to the scene because they can often get there a few minutes faster than the paramedics can. The evidence that this faster response saves lives is scant to non-existent.

And when paramedics show up two minutes later, then what? Well, the firefighters can always direct traffic.

In most jurisdictions in North America, only 2 to 5 per cent of calls to fire departments are actual fire emergencies. The rest are medical emergencies, false alarms, vehicle accidents and other miscellaneous events. Last year, Toronto's fire department logged 145,335 incidents, around 7 per cent of which were "reported" fires. The number of actual fires was considerably smaller. Despite those dangerously unfilled firefighting jobs, fire fatalities in Toronto have dropped from 19 in 2001 to only nine last year.

If the nature of emergencies has changed profoundly, why hasn't our model for responding to them changed at all? The answer: union clout and spineless politicians (who often enjoy the benefit of union clout at election time). That is why we have become all too accustomed to the sight of million-dollar hook-and-ladders screaming down the block whenever a little old lady has a fainting spell.

Toronto's firefighters are near the top of the heap. They enjoy some of the best pay, pensions, perks and work conditions in North America. Toronto's per-capita firefighting tab is 30 per cent higher than in neighbouring Mississauga. Many firefighters pull down in excess of six figures. They get regular "recognition bonuses" so they won't leave, despite the fact that retention is not a problem. They can retire in their early 50s on full pensions. Best of all, they are required to work a minimum of seven or eight 24-hour shifts a month, which leaves lots of time for driving limos or working construction on the side. As for the crucial issue of response time, a 2010 study of 14 fire departments clocked how long it took firemen to get dressed and get on their trucks. Toronto placed last.

Across the U.S., the firefighters' gravy train is crashing to a halt as municipalities run out of money. Some smaller cities are amalgamating services, and some are contracting out. At least one is planning to replace a few of its fire trucks with a paramedic in an SUV.

But not in Toronto, where smoke, mirrors and fear-mongering have triumphed once again. Yesterday the firefighters' union won their budget fight. And citizens will pay and pay and pay.

Editor's note: Originally, this column stated that Toronto firefighters worked a minimum of six 24-hour shifts a month. This version has been corrected.

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