

Strategies to Reduce Absenteeism within the Newark Fire Department

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ABSTRACT

Background

The use of unscheduled leave has deleterious effects on staffing and resource availability and can impact the operational effectiveness of a company. The collective bargaining agreement between the City of Newark and Newark Firefighters Local 109 includes provisions that offer three (3) ways in which unused sick time can be converted to financial compensation for the firefighter, including a provision that provides all uniformed members two (2) personal days per year that can be used as 24 hours of time off. When firefighters choose to take time off without providing advance notice then it can impact staffing, morale, and departmental funds.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effect of unscheduled sick leave on the NFD and to identify potential strategies, incentives, and programs that could mitigate any negative effect of unscheduled absenteeism within the Division. The specific questions to address included:

1. What was the cumulative amount of sick leave hours for employees of the Newark Fire Department in 2017 and 2018?
2. What, if any, were the effects of the number of hours used by employees?
3. What, if any, underlying issues were identified as reasons why employees use sick leave?
4. What, if any, additional incentives could be implemented to reduce absenteeism?

Methods

First, a thorough review of available literature was conducted to address the above questions. Next, a survey was created with a goal of identifying specific incentives or programs used by other departments to curb the effects of absenteeism. The survey was then distributed to several fire departments in the area. Responses were collected and results analyzed.

Results

Most unscheduled leave occurred during warm-weather months and during week days. Several incentive-based programs were identified and the following recommendations were a result of the

research conducted. The department has a relatively clear, succinct policy as it relates to sick leave and requires documentation from a physician; however, this policy is not routinely enforced by the company, or line-level supervisors.

Conclusions

In order to address specific factors related to absenteeism, the department should provide appropriate resources to the employees as they relate to behavioral health, specifically how to cope and deal with the physical and mental effects from the job associated stressors.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The Newark Fire Department (NFD), located in Licking County, Ohio, has experienced relatively moderate, but steady growth over the past decade. The fire department, rich in tradition and heritage, was officially chartered in 1869, making it one of the oldest fire department agencies in the region. The fire department, like most public safety agencies of its size, is a multi-million-dollar business that requires responsible management to remain viable and effective. The administration is been consistently challenged with finding strategies to provide the appropriate levels of funding necessary to sustain acceptable levels of service to the community. Historically, the fire department has not increased staffing and/or personnel levels in accordance with the demand for emergency services.

The most significant or largest portion of the department's budget is for staffing and the ancillary costs associated with personnel. In addition to the individual salary an employee earns, each firefighter receives additional benefits that include, but are not limited to, vacation time, sick leave, medical insurance options, retirement/pension, and a transitional work schedule. Employees accrue benefit time and associated time-off based on the length of combined service to the NFD and other select state agencies. The collective bargaining agreement stipulates the rate that benefit time is accrued in addition to other aspects of staffing that are contractually mandated to the employee on behalf of the employer. One provision relates to the use of the "Kelly Day", which is occurs when a firefighter is given a full 24-hour shift of work off duty when he/she is scheduled to work 10 shifts in a 4-week period. Per the current contract, each specific unit or duty day is permitted to have a minimum of four (4) employees off duty on a Kelly Day and an additional two (2) employees off on vacation time. In most cases, there will be (6) positions that are unfilled each day due to the above-mentioned employee benefits, resulting in a need for the roles to be filled by other employees. In the situations where there is an increase in unfilled positions, such as when a firefighter is off on sick leave, this typically results in overtime that must be paid to an employee who would have otherwise been off duty in order to effectively staff and maintain a

minimum level of service. When unscheduled absenteeism is added to this staffing dynamic it can result in stations being closed, temporarily or otherwise, until sufficient levels of staffing can be attained.

This study aims to address the problem of unscheduled sick leave within the Newark Fire Department by first understanding the impact that it has on the department and then working to find ways to mitigate the negative effects. In the event that unscheduled sick leave can be reduced, the results would permit the fire department administration to maintain sufficient staffing for each apparatus, keeping additional resources in service on a more regular basis, decreasing employee work loads, improving morale, and ultimately decreasing the budgetary needs that result from the increased burden of employee overtime.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies, incentives, and programs that could have a positive effect on reducing sick leave and unscheduled time off within the Newark Fire Department. Recommendations from the completion of this project will be presented to the fire department, the administrative membership, and the city administration for review and potentially used for negotiation of the collective bargaining unit. The findings included within this report could potentially motivate employees to not use accrued leave for purposes outside of the policy and to reduce the number of events that constitute inappropriate use of sick leave. To conduct this study, a survey was distributed and responses analyzed and historical research review was performed.

Research Questions

The research questions this study investigated were:

1. What was the cumulative amount of sick leave hours for employees of the Newark Fire Department in 2017 and 2018?
2. What, if any, are the effects experienced by similar sized departments?
3. What, if any, policies exist that increase absenteeism or use of sick leave?
4. What, if any, are strategies used by other departments doing to reduce absenteeism?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Newark Fire Department (NFD) is located in Newark, Ohio. Newark is located approximately 33 miles east of Columbus and serves as the Licking County seat. The fire department was officially chartered in 1869, is a career-only agency, meaning that it does not make use of a volunteer fire staff. There are 79 full-time uniformed firefighters employed by the NFD, including department officers. The fire department responds to over 11,200 calls for service annually. The Newark Fire Department has a municipal jurisdiction that covers approximately 21.37 square miles and has a population of just over 50,000 residents, with even more individuals within the city during peak business hours. Of the 79 full-time firefighters, 73 follow work scheduled that require the individual to work for a 24-hour period before being “off duty” for 48 hours. The remaining six firefighters, which include the Fire Chief and Deputy Fire Chief, are considered administrative and typically work a 40-hour work week. These individuals represent the EMS Division, the Prevention Division, and the Fire Investigation Bureau. Effects on unscheduled absenteeism are widespread and can affect all aspects of operational capacity. For the purposes of this project, unless otherwise specified, the term firefighter includes both firefighters and officers. Specifically, call-offs result in an increased use of overtime and extra work hours for those that must fill the vacated roles, resulting in transport units being out of service, added workloads to other individuals, and an overall reduction in staffing numbers to serve the community at any one given time.

The Newark Fire Department is a progressive, comprehensive emergency services agency that currently operates out of five (5) stations. The responsibilities of the Newark Fire Department include, but are not limited to, emergency medical services, fire and rescue response, fire prevention, fire investigation, hazardous material mitigation. In addition, the NFD is responsible for training its employees, maintaining an environment of safety, and conducting public education. The services provided by the NFD are comparable to any other emergency services entity but also include various non-emergency-type aspects such as public education and

strategic planning. The majority of services offered by the fire department fall into the category of emergency medical, which accounts for 88% of the work volume and results in approximately 9,900 calls annually. In 2011, the previously mandated minimum staffing number of 19 firefighters per day was abolished through the collective bargaining process. Prior to the binding arbitration, the associated costs of staffing were much higher simply due to the contractual requirement regarding staffing. Under the previous agreement, up to 11 of the 19 firefighters assigned to work on a particular day could be off as a result of unscheduled leave, drastically affecting the department in many aspects. The Newark Fire Department has never relied upon volunteer or part-time staffing to supplement the full-time ranks, but there has been significant consideration given to implementing such a program. In February of 2011, a new staffing policy was created that ultimately resulted in abolishment of the previous policy requiring a specific number of firefighters to be on duty on any given day. Although it has not been formally defined, the typical expectation now is that 16 firefighters will be on duty every day. This unofficial number is a result of the operational needs of the department as they relate to staffing three transport units, three fire trucks (suppression/rescue units), and one chief level officer (battalion). Up to six firefighters can be expected to be unavailable each day, with four permitted off on Kelly days and the remaining two off on scheduled vacation. When unscheduled leave occurs, the minimum number of assigned personnel unavailable on any day increases, thus requiring significant strain on other resources, most specifically overtime costs. When unscheduled leave such as sick leave does not occur, the resources necessary to carry out the emergency services, namely transport units, remain in service. Any extra firefighters are placed on suppression units, thus reducing the workload amongst all units in a more balanced and equitable manner.

In the warm weather months, there is a trend toward increased unscheduled leave, forcing administration to utilize more overtime in order to simply maintain the lowest level of response units that the department needs in order to operate. In most cases, this results in at least 16 firefighters being maintained on-duty each and every day. The amount of overtime spent from

year to year in order to maintain this unofficial minimum number varies, but is typically upwards of \$250,000.00 annually (would be good to add a graph here showing any data you have related to this figure, e.g., line chart showing cost per year over several years). The Newark Fire Department has additional responsibilities besides the primary duties associated with emergency response. When staffing levels reach the minimum number of personnel on duty, secondary responsibilities of the division such as traveling for training, equipment and facility inspections, equipment testing, public education, and coverage for public events suffer. When overtime dollars are spent to maintain staffing levels because of unscheduled leave, all of the other associated overtime expenditures are decreased or cease entirely. The number of firefighters who are permitted off on each day has remained unchanged due to the fact that these conditions are negotiated in the collective bargaining agreement and can otherwise not be modified.

Fire department payroll records were accessed and information related to the research topic extracted. Specifically, sick leave usage reports for all employees were obtained to determine actual sick leave use for the years 2017 and 2018. The 2017 data showed that the day of the week with the most absenteeism was Tuesdays. Tuesdays accounted for 1,121.25 hours of sick leave use. Three additional days attributed over 1,000 hours of sick leave use as well. These days in descending order were Thursday (1,070 hours), Friday (1,040.50 hours), and Wednesday with 1,001.50 hours. It is interesting to note that Sundays had the least amount of sick leave use at just 650.00 hours and only 959.50 hours were used on Saturdays. A total of 6,680 hours of sick leave were used by the 79 firefighters in 2017. The 2018 data showed that the day of the week with the highest absenteeism was Wednesdays. Wednesdays accounted for 1,308.25 hours of sick leave use, followed very closely by Thursdays at 1,293 hours of use. Each day of the week surpassed 798 hours. The total usage for the remaining days in 2018 in ascending order were Fridays (1,292.50), Tuesdays (1,221.25), Mondays (1,086.50), Saturdays (964.75) and Sundays (799.07). A total of 7,966 hours of sick leave were used by the 79 firefighters in 2018. The number of sick hours used remained relatively stable between the two years studied, with a 1.19%

increase in usage between 2017 and 2018. The annual increase may be a relatively small percentage, but may have significant effects on the operational aspects of the division on a day-to-day basis.

Additional data obtained from the fire department records as well as the city auditor's office includes the amount of sick leave used during each specific month. In 2017, the month with the most sick-leave usage was December, with 1,129.50 total hours used. September was the second highest month for sick leave usage, with 684.75 total hours used. The summer months of June, July, and August accounted for a combined total of 1,190.25 hours. In regards to usage in 2017, Saturday was higher than Sunday. Specifically, Saturdays accounted for 959.50 total hours used, and Sundays totaled 650 hours used.

In 2018, the month with the most sick-leave usage was the month of July, which accounted for a total of 1,097.25 hours used. The next highest month for the corresponding year was January, with 948 hours used. The months of June, July, and August yielded a combined total of 2,345.75 hours of sick leave used. When compared to the same three months from the previous year, there was an increase in total hours used of 1155.50 hours.

In 2017, Saturdays and Sundays resulted in a total of 1,609.50 hours of sick leave used. Saturday (959.50) was the higher of the two weekend days and accounted for 14 percent when compared to the weekdays of Monday through Friday.

The peak vacation months in the Newark Fire Department in 2018 were the summer months of June, July, August. In 2018, December was the month with the highest usage of sick leave, however, that year the summer months still contributed significantly to the final numbers.

In 2018, Saturdays and Sundays showed a lower rate of absenteeism when compared to the other days of the week. Sundays showed the least amount of sick leave usage with 799.07 hours used followed by Saturdays with 964.75 hours used. The day of the week with the most amount of sick leave used was Wednesday, with 1,308.25 total hours used throughout the year. The data revealed that the combined usage of sick leave in 2017 and 2018 was the lowest in July and April. Interestingly, there was a drastic

difference in the number of sick hours used in the summer months of June, July, and August between 2017 to 2018. In 2018, there were 1,155.50 more total hours used compared to 2017. The data revealed that Sundays had the fewest number of sick hours used over the past two years when compared to the other days of the week (## total). Sick leave usage for Department recognized holidays totaled less than 1 percent of the total hours used by employees in 2017 and 2018. Use of sick hours during Department recognized holidays has not been a significant concern over the last two years given that contractual language prevents sick leave usage on the major holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas unless the employee provides written documentation from a licensed physician.

The issue of sick leave usage and overall absenteeism needs to be further evaluated to totally understand the impact it has on the organization and its members. According to 2017 records from the fire department and the auditor's office, sick leave associated losses cost the department \$246,807.54 in lost production. This was determined by figuring the combined hourly rate of each firefighter absent multiplied by the total number of hours that member was absent. This figure does include the benefits paid to each respective member during the period(s) of their absence. When employees notify the department of their absence just prior to the start of their respective shift it further complicates the staffing situation. The department understandably wants employees who are truly sick to take advantage of the associated sick leave benefits. The purpose of this benefit is to allow the firefighters or their immediate family member the appropriate amount of time to recover from sickness and/or injury without losing compensation. When a firefighter elects to use the benefit of sick time without possessing a qualifying illness then he/she is engaging in inappropriate use of sick leave, termed absenteeism. Trending or patterned usage represents one possible means to track inappropriate behavior, but even if discovered it can be challenging to curb this type of behavior. The Collective Bargaining Agreement includes provisions that permit a retiring member to receive monetary compensation for unused sick time, up to an amount of \$17,500.00. Retiring firefighters receive 1 hour of compensation for every two hours of unused leave. In addition to this retirement benefit, the collective bargaining agreement also includes provisions that allow an employee to cash in sick leave annually which is based upon the number of hours

the respective employee has used over the course of a year. Employees who have accumulated four hundred and eighty (480) hours of sick leave or more may elect to convert sick leave to cash at the rate of three hours pay for each four hours of sick leave being converted according to the following 12-month schedule: no usage (154 hours), 1-47 hours (128 hours), 48-119 hours (102 hours), 120 plus hours (0 hours). The aforementioned contractual provisions are the only benefits available to the employee that would otherwise motivate members to not use sick leave or other means of absenteeism.

The results of this study will have a positive impact on the Newark Fire Department i by uncovering patterns of sick leave use and providing recommendations how best to curb the negative effect that inappropriate use can have on the Department. By reducing absenteeism, the department staffing on any and all days would be increased, thus reducing the impact on financial resources as well as the workload placed on other employees of the division. The recommendations made as a result of this research could be reviewed by the administration and perhaps offered in the negotiation process with the union for those members who satisfy the mutually agreed upon provisions. To reduce the amount of unscheduled sick leave would have multiple positive effects on the operations of the fire department, including the reduction of overtime costs and unbalanced workload dispersion on other members who have to complete additional duties to make up for the lack of available personnel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research for this project began by using several online databases and also by collecting data from the human resource director, the fire department secretary, and the deputy auditor. The databases queried included PubMed, Scopus, and Cochrane Review. In addition, department records were searched and reviewed in order to provide context for understanding the research question in relation to the Newark Fire Department.

The above-mentioned databases were queried to identify articles related to “absenteeism” “firefighter” “public service” “fire department” and similar search terms. In total, more than 100 articles were identified. The abstract for each article was read in its entirety to determine the relevance to the current research topic. Articles that were not on topic and/or incomplete were excluded. After excluding articles that did not meet criteria, 10 articles remained. These articles were read in their entirety and data extracted for use in this research paper.

The research included within this project suggests that some of these negotiated benefits might actually increase the rate of sick leave usage and overall absenteeism in the division. According to Forbes (2013), absenteeism in the United States results in approximately \$84 billion dollars in lost production amongst the workforce (citation). It is also noted that when health care workers do not have the ability to exercise a vacation day, they are more likely to utilize sick leave. Of note, there was a significant increase in sick leave usage and overall absenteeism in the Newark Fire Department from 2017 to 2018. A study of trending data and reports on leave usage at NFD support the possibility that, similar to other health care workers, firefighters within the department may be using sick leave in lieu of vacation. This is a troubling possibility and one that should be further studied by management in order to determine potential causes and solutions.

Scheduled absences are approved in advance for such events as vacations, medical appointments, jury duty, funerals, and other events in which an employee would have normally been assigned to work. Unscheduled events are defined as personal and family illness or injury, the death of a family member and other situations that result in an emergent or unplanned absence from work. According to the National

Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), anxiety and depression are the two leading factors associated with absenteeism in the workplace (Sandoiu, 2018). Another study suggests that job strain, defined as low control and high demand, is the number one cause of stress in the workplace in the United States, and can be directly attached to the factors associated with anxiety and depression (Lancet Psychiatry, 2018). Among the employees who consider their respective workplace to be mentally unhealthy, almost 50% exercised sick leave or unscheduled absenteeism at least once in the last calendar year. Wagner and colleagues studied firefighters in British Columbia and found lower rates of mental health issues and workplace absenteeism to be associated with positive, effective coping skills and the availability of programs that support and teach skills necessary to develop emotional and social intelligence (citation).

Peacock (1998) suggests that the culture within the department of the “use it or lose it” mentality regarding unscheduled absenteeism needs to change. Peacock suggests that a committee of stakeholders should explore incentives and support programs that are mutually beneficial to all parties. The NFD is required by law to grant sick leave to employees of the fire department, and the details of the policy are negotiated as part of the collective bargaining agreement. Any changes regarding the accrual or use of sick leave would need to be discussed in contractual negotiations with the union executive board.

Last minute or unscheduled absenteeism negates and changes any forward planning that supervisors have made in regards to their respective staffing assignments. Typically, this results in a medic (transport) unit being closed or by re-assigning an extra member of a fire apparatus to a medic unit. Furthermore, when members get re-assigned to other stations that they normally do not work at, the normal tasks and duties are often not completed. Members who are forced to travel or are temporarily re-assigned (transferred) often do not carry an inherent quality of ownership. These members often do not take the initiative to complete the tasks associated with their temporary transfer because they are not normally assigned to that specific station. The accumulation of the workload that is dispersed to the other employees could lead to resentment or a lack of commitment for the essential job tasks associated with being a firefighter.

The International City Managers Association (ICMA) states that one of the most common benefits provided to employees is that of paid sick leave. The City of Newark does provide this paid benefit to members of the fire department at a rate that exceeds Ohio Revised Code mandate (ORC, 2016). Newark firefighters currently accrue 7.38 hours of sick leave bi-weekly, and even though this rate of accrual is contractually negotiated, it exceeds the ORC minimum statute of four hours per pay period.

Researchers have additionally found that some current benefits that many public sector agencies use to assist employees might actually add to the overall absenteeism. In 2003, Pitkoff wrote that a generous sick leave provision might actually add to the amount of leave an employee takes. Furthermore, he (Pitkoff) stated that "...research suggests that the greater the number of sick days available, the greater number of sick days taken." (2003, para.6). Pitkoff then further discussed the common practice of sick leave accrual banks. Sick leave accrual banks were formed by employees voluntarily donating an unused portion of their sick leave to a collective bank that another employee could draw from in the event of a prolonged absence. However, he wrote in the journal *School Administrator*,

Sick leave banks result in higher short-term absenteeism. They send the message to some teachers that they can use more of their sick days than needed each year because it really is not necessary to have an accumulation of days in the event of a catastrophic illness (2003, para.9). "Pitkoff found that there is a direct relationship between the number of sick hours available and the number of sick hours used. In addition, he found that sick leave banks, defined as a collective bank that employees can draw from in the event of prolonged absence, can lead to increased use of sick leave for non-essential reasons."

The Newark Fire Department does have an additional benefit regarding catastrophic sick leave donation which allows members to donate up to 48 hours of sick leave to a member who has exhausted all of their time for qualified reasons. In research conducted by McHugh (2001), it was found that a high level of absenteeism was often attributed to the fact that the majority of employees do not suffer any financial loss when they are absent from work. Within the Newark Fire Department, it is expected that sick leave will be used situations outside of person illness, including for the birth or adoption of a child. With the current model, the employee does not suffer a financial loss by using this time off and may therefore be incentivized to use it for a wider range of conditions that might what otherwise be expected.

The job of a firefighter is dangerous and requires frequent contact with hazardous materials. Picchi (2016) wrote about these hazards and described how the intermittent exposure to the elements, and the illnesses faced in the line of duty could also contribute to firefighters becoming ill. In this setting, it was not expected or appropriate for a truly ill firefighter to report for duty, although some employees did. In fact, the situation of an ill employee coming to work to avoid absenteeism had even been given the term “presenteeism”. Presenteeism may even pose potential problems such as lower productivity and contagion. Contrary to Picchi (2016), The cost is not directly in lost workdays, but indirectly in paying for more inefficient workdays and a potential for exponential multiplication of this cost by greater numbers of employees being affected by ill health and lost productivity (Braun, 2003, para.5).

The Braun group found that 83% believed that unscheduled absences would more than likely stay at the current rate or even worsen in the next two years and associated costs would not decrease until employers made greater efforts to manage the impact of absences (2003) “Lower morale and more pressure to be at work seem to result in sick people being a work, [*sic*] and others taking unscheduled leave for personal reasons.” (2003, Factors section, para.9). Some managers were strongly critical of attendance bonuses and rewards programs offered as incentives for this reason. Companies don’t implement transitional or modified duty plans merely to be nice to employees. Research suggests that return-to-work strategies help curtail the rising costs of unscheduled absences, which cut into productivity and profits. Direct costs of unscheduled absences, including those for worker’s compensation, disability and family and medical leave, average about 4 percent of payroll (Krantz, 2003, p.76). As a strategy for minimizing time away from work, the Ohio Bureau of Worker’s Compensation offers a benefit to employers with a Transitional Work Program (TWP). The TWP is meant to allow injured employees to return to work while still recovering through job modifications that consider the individual’s injuries and associated limitations. In lieu of an official transitional work program (TWP), the Newark Fire Department offers the option of “light duty” for injured firefighters that meet criteria. Light duty entails a modified schedule based on a 40-hour work week and provides limitations on the type of the work that an employee can participate in while on duty. Employees who are granted light duty remain off company

until they have been cleared by the fire department physician, but working a light duty schedule as opposed to being completely off work allows the employee to minimize the number of sick hours used while recovering from injury.

Interestingly, studies have shown that shift workers use more unscheduled sick time than those who are assigned to work a traditional, 40-hour schedule. Peacock and associates speculate that, “the twenty-four-hour work shift that is common in the fire service can lead to exhaustion, a feeling of isolation from their family and a multitude of other problems for a firefighter.” (Peacock, 1998, p.7). The Braun Consulting Group reported, “Extended hours employees only account for 17.6 percent of the U.S. workforce, but a whopping 41 percent of the total U.S. cost of absenteeism” (2003, Facts and Figures, para.6). The unique challenges associated with the fire service, including the non-traditional work schedule and the stress of the job, are factors that must be considered when discussing absenteeism.

Other factors that may have contributed to sick leave usage includes off-duty injuries, illness to one’s self or immediate family, a doctor’s appointment, childcare issues, stress, and others. Braun Consulting found that nearly two-thirds of unscheduled absences fell into one of four classifications: family issues (22%), personal needs (18%), entitlement mentality (13%), and stress (11%) (2003).

The American Psychological Association reported that stress costs American industries approximately \$300 billion each year in absenteeism in lost or reduced productivity, averaging \$7,500 per worker per year. Firefighters are often confronted with hazardous working conditions on emergency scenes or required to meet approaching project deadlines and each of these factors contribute stress to their life. “Overstressed individuals take sick days at work more frequently....” (McEvoy, 2002, para.1). Firefighters returning from a temporary transfer to another station or administrative duty have experienced the highest levels of associated job-related stress.

Dilts and colleagues (1995) studied strategies for mitigating absenteeism and ultimately developed a series of recommendations, which they termed, an Integrated Model of Absenteeism Control. Their model theorized that three conditions must be met to assure regular attendance in the workplace.

They state that an opportunity to work, a willingness to work, and the capacity to work needs to be present to enable an individual to attend work as scheduled. They further stated,

Indeed, illness constitutes the single greatest cause of absenteeism. Not so obvious is the fact that personal characteristics influence an individual's ability to attend work. Personal characteristics exerting such an influence include accident proneness (some employers contend that certain employees are accidents waiting to happen), the ability to cope with stress, and age (1995, p.145).

Job dissatisfaction was also found to play a factor in absenteeism. If an individual is dissatisfied with their job or position it may very well show in their absenteeism, although this is not an absolute. According to Baron and Greenberg, the lower the individual's satisfaction with their job, the more likely they are to be absent from work. "...dissatisfaction with one's job was likely to be just one of many factors influencing employee's decisions to report or not to report to work." (1995, p.178). They suggest that some employees who were dissatisfied with their job may still maintain good attendance if they feel their work is important, while other employees in the same job may not be motivated by the importance of the task or associated duties. Further, organizations with a high level of commitment tend to be associated with lower levels of absenteeism (1995). A lack of motivation therefore could be a factor that influences absenteeism rates within the Newark Fire Department.

A review of the literature identified several strategies that found some level of success in the private sector. There may be concepts that can apply to NFD, but there may be alterations that need to be made to apply them to the public service sector. A common theme in the literature reviewed was use of a reward system of some type as an incentive to reduce absenteeism. Schappi wrote (1988), that good attendance could be rewarded in a tangible or intangible form. Among the rewards he spoke of are cash bonuses, sick leave bonuses, retirement benefits, additional time off, recognition in a company newsletter, year-end recognition ceremonies, employee of the month and year, and employee lotteries. In fact, Rhodes and Steers stated, "The first major technique for controlling absenteeism relies on reward systems for good attendance." (1990, p.70).

Several companies have used reward strategies where an employee with minimal or no absences for a predetermined period of time is given an option to buy back a portion of their unused sick leave. Another popular option was an employee lottery. Employees meeting the preset criteria have their name placed in a lottery to be drawn for cash rewards or prizes. The fire department, being a public sector organization, may need to further research the implications and restrictions that might apply using this incentive.

There are some perceived drawbacks of a reward system, as pointed out by critics of the strategy. For example, "Some managers object to rewarding employees merely for showing up at work because, presumably this is what you are already paid to do." (Schappi, 1988, p.127). Dunn and Wilkinson wrote a similar view where they found, "Some managers believe that employees should not receive any additional income to attend work and others felt that many of the attendance bonuses were so small that the value of the scheme was criticized." (2001, p.229). They further found that some managers felt that financial bonuses to employees sent a message that managers had given up their responsibility and authority to subsequently manage the work force. They stated that the problem needed to be attacked at the foundational level. Some of the root problems include a lack of consistency in the approach used to address the issue and a lack of training for managers in addressing the problems and dealing with them in a timely manner (2001). Bennett agreed with this by saying that it was important to acknowledge that in some cases the root cause of injuries and illnesses may be partly attributed to the way the agency is managed (2002). Schappi showed that in some instances the rates of absenteeism reverted back to the pre-reward level once the novelty of the program wore off. "A reduction in the rate of absenteeism should not be considered a success without asking an important question first - is your workplace now a better place to work in terms of morale after an absence reduction"? (Dunn, Wilkinson, 2001).

Another tactic of managing absenteeism was not with rewards, but instead by fear or punishment through the enforcement of work rules. Bennett reported, "The results of the research indicated that the rigorous application of absence management rules can be effective in reducing absenteeism rates; however, employees indicated that such policies instill fear...." (2002, p.440). McHugh stated, "....

where unnecessary absences remain unaddressed, it can lead to a spiraling effect. This manifest itself in the development as a negative attitude amongst co-workers causing them to feel that they should take days off because their colleagues “get away with it.” (2001, p.50). Additional research confirmed this view by saying, “The second general approach to absence control policies involves the use of punishment and negative reinforcement.” (Rhodes, Steers, 1990, p.81). Organizations could drastically reduce the extent of absenteeism by adopting policies and procedures to deter and not encourage absences. It should further be noted that these policies do not always have to include discipline but can reflect the existence of a reasonable policy that does not encourage absenteeism (Bennett, 2002). Approaches meant to discourage absenteeism without including a punishment include requiring the sick or injured employee to physically report to their work facility before being dismissed to return home, requiring a written doctor’s excuse to justify each absence, discipline that escalates based on the duration of absence, required return to work interviews, a no-fault plan, and many others. One concern with this approach is that if there is a predefined length of absence that triggers discipline, then employees who are using sick leave without an illness or injury could circumvent discipline by returning to work one day before the threshold. One way to mitigate this issue would be to keep not announce the discipline threshold to employees. Due to this reasoning, the preset trigger level no-fault plan was not desirable (Dunn, Wilkinson, 2001). One human resource manager (external to the fire service) commented that return to work interviews could be the best deterrent to “would-be” offenders. The HR manager instructed other managers to discuss with the individuals the events that had happened in their absence, define to the employee the amount of previously used sick leave, ascertain if any additional foreseeable sick leave will be used stemming from this absence, and so forth. Use of this tactic led to a decline in absence rates (Dunn, Wilkinson, 2001). Once employees were receiving punishment for absences, some companies had other plans to assist the employees in “redeeming” themselves. Among these were removing absence disciplinary records or marks from their employee files when the employee followed up with perfect attendance for predefined period of time (1990). According to the European Foundation, “A company can also try to reduce

workplace absenteeism by tightening up procedures relating to control of absenteeism and by intensifying checks on absent employees.” (1997, p.12).

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) were also mentioned as an additional tool to assist with controlling absenteeism. “Employee assistance programs can help when workers’ personal problems interfere with their work life.” (HR Series-Policies and Practices, 2002, p.5704). Originally established to assist employees with different substance abuse conditions, EAPs now offer a wide variety of services to the employee as well as their immediate family members. These services remain anonymous to the employer in most cases; however, an employee may be required to make use of these programs if rehabilitation is found to be in need (Coleman, 2003). Coleman continues to say that employers establish EAPs to provide employees with affordable access to treatment, and in turn, they benefit by reducing the costs associated with poor productivity, on-the-job injuries, excessive absenteeism, and turnover. These programs are readily available and offer a source of counseling in a broad variety of areas for an employee. In yet another study, Cole (2002) reported that by providing incentives that discourage an entitlement mentality at the first sneeze, it could be beneficial in curbing the costs associated with absenteeism. One success story in the reduction of absenteeism came from a major economy defense contractor that conducted a lottery contest for their employees. They experienced a 38% reduction in absenteeism from this lottery alone (Cole, 2002).

Additional researched strategies range from sick leave buy-back programs in which a portion of an employee’s unused sick leave could be forfeited in lieu of a payment or additional vacation days, to incentives like the inability to sign up for overtime if an employee has been recently absent. Another factor to consider when discussing absenteeism is the possibility of an underlying physical condition that can cause the absences, such as poor health or fitness. However, studies have found that an increase in fitness does not necessarily correlate to a decrease in absenteeism (Harris and Wattles, 2003). While increased fitness levels lead to improved health, and healthier employees are less likely to be absent due to illness, there was no difference found to exist between exercising and non-exercising groups of individuals in regards to rate of absenteeism (Harris, Wattles, 2003). In closing, McHugh states that it is

essential that all local government organizations become more aware of the degree to which employee absence is an unnecessary cost; a cost which they must seek to reduce to a minimum if they are to survive and grow in the current climate of change. This awareness must start at the top with management, where the estimated cost of absence is sufficient to generate organizational commitment to subsequent action. Furthermore, there is a need to acknowledge that high levels of employee absence are indicative of systemic issues within the organization. Thus, the adoption of a holistic approach towards the issue of employee absence and its management is likely to foster improved organizational health (2001, p.57).

To summarize, the literature review resources have surfaced multiple programs, incentives, and ideas to be considered for implementation upon the completion of this project. The literature has further raised questions about some of the policies, benefits, and programs that the Newark Fire Department currently has in place. For example, the awarding or accrual of sick leave in excess of the requirement by the Ohio Revised Code, and the use of a sick leave bank that may be encouraging sick leave use. Even if there are not new programs or incentives implemented within the fire department at the conclusion of this research project, absenteeism might still be reduced through a re-emphasis of the policies currently in place. Any reduction in unscheduled use would be beneficial to the organization by reducing absenteeism and mitigating the impacts on training, on unit functions, on workload distribution, and on essentially all areas of the department and its operations.

PROCEDURES

The purpose of the research conducted was to identify incentives or other benefits that could potentially decrease unscheduled absences within the Newark Fire Department. Research began by providing the basis for the need of this study along with the history of the department and the overall situation that led to the need for this administrative action. This literature review was conducted through various academic and scholarly research platforms such as PubMed, Scopus, and Cochrane Review, as well as review of records at the Newark Fire Department.

The literature review primarily focused on the identified need to control or otherwise regulate absenteeism in the workplace, the effects of absenteeism on the individual and the organization, procedures that other organizations use that actually have increased their absenteeism rate, and to find effective, proven incentives that could reduce the use of unscheduled sick leave. The literature review examined fire department specific information as well as general information from the fields of human resources, accounting, business, and relevant industry pertaining to absenteeism.

Data was collected from the Newark City auditor's office and fire department records to provide data specific to our institution and to provide context for the remainder of the study. This data was collected from electronic records such as New World and Firehouse software, which is used by the department and city for the tracking of time for payroll purposes.

Records were reviewed and any sick leave usage that occurred on any of the holidays recognized by the city including provisions within the collective bargaining agreement were noted. The research was limited to year-end 2017 and 2018 data to avoid any confounding effect of the previous policy on staffing provisions, which ended after 2016.

The sick leave usage was summed to determine the total usage per year and further analysis was performed to show the usage by each of the seven-week days, usage rate on each of the recognized holidays, usage by the month, and by each respective work shift. That data was collected directly from the record, deidentified, and input into a password protected excel file.

Research question two was answered by an external survey instrument that was designed and sent to various departments of relevant and similar size in Ohio. The selected departments were similar in various ways to the Newark Fire Department. The similarities ranged from population size, department staffing, geographic location, and economic demographics.

The external survey was created after conducting the literature review and reading the texted titled *How to Conduct Your Own Survey* (Dillman and Salant, 1994). The purpose of the survey was to compare the department size, defined by the number of career full-time firefighters working the three-platoon system, average sick leave usage and accrual rates, retirement buy-back ratios, determine if any effective incentives to reduce absenteeism exist that the Newark Fire Department could implement, and to compare the absenteeism rate between the Newark Fire Department and those similar departments to determine if an absenteeism issue truly exists. A portion of the external survey instruments questions were based on information gathered through the literature review. The format of this survey contained open-ended, closed-ended, and Likert style questions. The external instrument was randomly previewed by some fire department personnel for clarity of the questions prior to sending. Once input had been received from the department personnel, the questions were revised and the external survey was sent to comparative-sized agencies which totaled about 35. There was no monetary incentive for compensation, but electronic communication (i.e. email) was utilized. The rate of return was 36.67%.

The results from the external survey were entered into a spreadsheet to track and results and then analyzed to surface programs, policies, procedures, incentives, and benefits that other agencies had implemented and the success rate of these, as well as to compare the sick leave usage of similar fire departments to that of the Newark Fire Department.

Additionally, in the same time frame, an internal survey instrument was constructed and distributed to the 84 members in the Newark Fire Department. The purpose of the internal survey was to determine what strategies, if any; the members felt would reduce their own sick leave usage. The internal survey was further used to re-evaluate the strategies that the members would most like to see the Newark Fire Department implement to address the rising rate of absenteeism.

A portion of the internal survey questions were based on information gathered through the literature review and was asked using a Likert style format. The internal instrument randomly previewed, as well, by some members for clarity of the questions prior to distribution. Once the input had been received from the members, the questions were revised and the internal survey was distributed throughout the Division. A total of 60 surveys were returned from the frame of 84 with a rate of return totaling 71.4%.

The results from the internal survey were entered into a spreadsheet to track the results and then analyzed to surface programs, policies, procedures, incentives, and benefits that the members felt would be most effective at controlling their personal and the department rate of absenteeism. After analysis of the results of the internal and external survey instruments, a comparison was made to find strategies that had externally proven to be effective against the internal surveys highest remarks. Those strategies that were common to both surveys would perhaps become a recommendation for implementation.

Research questions three and four were also answered in part by the responses from the two surveys that were conducted, but also information within the literature review was used to assist in finding recommendations as well. The literature review for these questions was obtained through various online databases and electronic research platforms. The information contained within the literature review has been utilized in the discussion and development of this research.

Definition of Terms

Advanced Life Support (ALS), refers to the advanced life-saving procedures such as intravenous therapy, medication/drug therapy, airway management, and defibrillation (Essentials of Paramedic Care, 2017).

Kelly Day, a tour of normal scheduled duty that firefighters are compensated and scheduled off that does not count as hours worked in order to comply with the Fair Labor Standard Act 7(k) ruling (Fair Labor Standards Act, 2005).

Line Firefighter, a firefighter who whose primary function is reduction, enforcement, and suppression of firefighting activities (United States Code 3796, 1976).

Medic, an emergency medical transport vehicle staffed by a minimum of two (2) certified paramedics at all times which responds to both basic and advanced call criteria (Newark Fire Department, 2018).

Three-Platoon Schedule, a firefighter work schedule consisting of three separate work shifts that rotate through a 24-hour on, 48-hour off schedule, which totals a normal pay cycle of 48 hours and includes a Kelly Day (CBA, 2019).

Limitations of the Study

The external surveys were distributed to agencies of similar sample-size throughout the Central Ohio area. Members of each of the agencies (surveyed) were sent the instrument which contained multiple questions which required the respondent to select a pre-defined answer or fill in the blank, if applicable. One hundred percent of the population of each department did not complete and/or return the survey instrument information. Forty (40) surveys were sent out and only fourteen (14) were returned. The lack of participation regarding the survey instrument left the author with only approximately 36% of the information returned, thus reducing the amount of quantifiable data sought. Furthermore, the research topic is subject to certain limitations (i.e. participation) and assumptions. Due to an assumed difference in fire department demographics, staffing and budgetary concerns, the research gathered in the report lacks specific alternatives or an overall comprehensive analysis of what potential alternatives exist that are relevant to the problem. This author attempted to design an instrument that would gather information showing potential alternatives used within other agencies that ultimately reduced the number of hours and costs associated with unscheduled absenteeism. An assumption was made that all respondents would understand the survey questions, possess the knowledge and ability to answer the survey, and would return the instrument data in a timely manner. The significance associated with the low rate of return and participation demonstrates that there simply is not enough information acquired within the specific survey

region to provide potential alternatives that are viable and otherwise attainable within the Newark Fire Department.

The topic of absenteeism and sick leave surfaced many journal articles, periodicals, position papers, books, and various other sources; however, most were of considerable age and/or focused on private sector business. It so appears that recent and more current information as it relates to the fire service or public sector employment is not readily available. Absenteeism in the fire service is a legitimate problem that needed to be studied and requires further attention.

From the results of the external survey instrument, it is evident that fire departments abroad have similar experiences with absenteeism, but not all fire departments have tracked the data to show or document the usage within their respective department.

Further, some survey questions were not interpreted as expected by the author. This yielded some data that either needed to be mathematically calculated or data was unusable. External survey questions two and six were commonly not, but not always, responded to as this researcher had anticipated. These questions were possibly flawed in their writing or interpretation. Additionally, some respondents provided information in a form other than the way the survey had requested. In some cases, this information was unusable as well and in yet other cases the surveys were returned partially incomplete or not at all.

Another limitation to this research was extended illnesses. On several occasions during this research period, the Newark Fire Department had personnel on sick leave as a result of extended illness or non-work-related procedure (i.e. elective surgery). These sick leave hours were included in this study for the fact that the department did not pay mandate overtime to replace them, therefore this did add to the staffing shortages as it relates to the data provided.

Patterns and abuse were neither included in this study. Patterned or trended usage and its occurrence in proximity to scheduled time off including vacation, comp time, training time, Kelly Days, or holiday hours were not included. Additionally, the abuse of sick leave usage was not a concern of this

study. This research project has in no way attempted to define or provided accusatory information regarding any associated abuse of sick leave in accordance with absenteeism.

Lastly, it was realized that there are other factors that account for the need to temporarily transfer personnel to other shifts and stations without concern for sick leave. Among these ratios of on-duty, full-time personnel against the number of off-duty or otherwise absent personnel. These and other factors are beyond the scope of this research and will not be included within this research and the incorporated findings.

RESULTS

The results of the data collection, analysis, and the discussion that follows are organized based on the four questions that were determined prior to the start of the research project.

What was the cumulative amount of sick leave hours for employees of the Newark Fire Department in 2017 and 2018?

To answer research question one, data obtained from the Newark City Auditor's office and department records were utilized to calculate the actual sick leave used by each employee and was also used to show the weekdays associated with occurrence. The 2017 data showed that the day of the week with the most absenteeism was Tuesdays. Tuesdays accounted for 1,121.25 hours of sick leave use. Three additional days attributed over 1,000 hours of sick leave use as well. These days in descending order were Thursday (1,070 hours), Friday (1,040.50 hours), and Wednesday with 1,001.50 hours. It is interesting to note that Sundays had the least amount of sick leave use at just 650.00 hours and only 959.50 hours were used on Saturdays. A total of 6,680 hours of sick leave were used by the 79 firefighters in 2017. The 2018 data showed that the day of the week with the highest absenteeism was Wednesdays. Wednesdays accounted for 1,308.25 hours of sick leave use, followed very closely by Thursdays at 1,293 hours of use. Each day of the week surpassed 798 hours. The total usage for the remaining days in 2018 in ascending order were Fridays (1,292.50), Tuesdays (1,221.25), Mondays (1,086.50), Saturdays (964.75) and Sundays at 799.07 hours. A total of 7,966 hours of sick leave were

used by the 79 firefighters in 2018. The number of sick hours used remained relatively stable between the two years studied, with a 1.19% increase in usage between 2017 and 2018. The annual increase may be a relatively small percentage, but when measured on a daily basis, has significant effects of the operational aspects of the division.

Additional data obtained from the fire department records as well as the city auditor's office includes the amount of sick leave used during each specific month. In 2017, the month with the most sick-leave usage was December which totaled 1,129.50 hours. September was the second highest month for sick leave usage, which totaled 684.75 hours. The summer months of June, July, and August actually accounted for a total of 1,190.25 hours. In regards to usage in 2017, Saturday was higher than Sunday. Specifically, Saturdays accounted for 959.50 hours, and Sundays totaled 650 hours.

In 2018, the month with the most sick-leave usage was the summer month of July which totaled 1,097.25 hours. The next highest month for the corresponding year was January, with 948 hours being used. The summer months of June, July, and August yielded a total of 2,345.75 hours of combined sick leave use. When compared to the summer months of the previous year (1,190.25), an increase of 1155.50 was used.

Research question two was:

What, if any, were the effects of the number of hours used by employees?

The effects of the number of hours used by employees within the Newark Fire Department is difficult to quantify. Not all of the effects associated with "time off" is actually being measured or is otherwise associated with something easily tracked such as "cost". The costs associated with absenteeism are also difficult to measure or otherwise quantify. In some cases, absent personnel are replaced by personnel paid at the overtime rate and in other cases, companies and stations are taken out of service, reducing service to the community and adding work tasks to the remainder of the work force. Although not easily quantifiable, the costs associated with reduced service to the community is significant. Records

of overtime do not easily delineate the costs associated with unscheduled absenteeism thus, increasing the difficulty associated with measuring the specific aspect of leave. Examining the individual employee attendance records does permit for further information on the details associated with absenteeism as it relates to a comparison. Regardless of the context, any “time-off” in the Newark fire Department directly correlates to a “replacement cost” of another employee. Even though many of the aspects directly associated with unscheduled time off are considered contractual benefits, the remainder of the aspects are not and fall into the “unscheduled absenteeism” category. Unscheduled absenteeism is difficult to plan for and ultimately manage given that each hour of time off is attached to an hour of “replacement” of another employee. In Newark, emergencies do not occur on a set timetable and duties must be done to completion, no matter how long it takes. Overtime or replacement costs are mandatory in the Newark Fire Department in support of our operational model that provides service to the citizens in the community. In addition to monetary effects associated with the hours of employee usage, the following aspects are ancillary factors and include (not limited to): exhaustion, loss of connection with friends, martial/relationship issues, accumulated stress levels, decreased work performance, physical/mental health, and even substance abuse.

Research question three was:

What, if any, underlying issues were identified as other reasons why employees use sick leave?

Identifying underlying issues as they relate to why employees use sick leave or unscheduled time off is difficult to measure. The difficulty with measuring or identifying associated reasons is that most of this time is attributed to contractual benefits or provisional language within the collective bargaining agreement. For example, members of the Newark Fire Department are contractually afforded two (2) “personal days”. Personal days are situations where any member can take paid time off from work and no aforementioned scheduling or prior approval must be given. Members are given two personal days in every annual period and even though they are not permitted to be used on holidays such as Thanksgiving

and Christmas, these benefits create issues. Each member can select which category of time that want to use and, in most cases, use sick leave thus saving their vacation time.

Another reason why employees use sick leave is when they have extended time off and elect to use provisions of the Family Medical Leave Act, of FMLA. One example of how this impacts the Newark Fire Department is when an employee takes extended time off to care for an immediate family member of has an elective, non-work-related surgery. In most cases, these events are not planned a budget prior to occurring, or at a minimum, are not made known to the employer. These areas do not necessarily constitute any associated “mis-use” of an employee’s time off, they just create hardship for agency as it relates to the back-filling of personnel as well as the associated financial costs associated with staffing an emergency services agency. The research conducted within this research project were unable to determine any other actual factors that influence the use of sick leave, primarily due to the lack of responses or return information included on the survey/inquiry instruments. As stated previously, the rate of return for the external survey instrument was 36.67 %. The associated rate of return and participation was extremely low and given that just over one-third of the departments who were surveyed responded, decreased the author’s ability to provide additional information and potential alternatives relevant to this project. For the sake of providing the most comprehensive analysis regarding this research, the question about using sick leave as vacation was included, yet no results were yielded in order to support this potential concern or general inquiry. Though it may exist within other agencies, employees who cannot otherwise get time off, specifically during holidays and summer months, were not found to have used or otherwise exercised sick leave in lieu of other appropriate forms of time off. Most, if not all, of the other reasons associated with sick leave use in the Newark Fire Department materialize in the form of contractually associated benefits. These associated benefits are, and have been factors that influence managements ability to effectively staff the department for decades. In most cases, these benefits were granted or otherwise mutually agreed upon during contract negotiations in lieu of higher wage increases.

Research question four was:

What, if any, additional incentives could be implemented to reduce unscheduled absenteeism?

The Newark Fire Department provides paid time off for employees that are unable to work due to illness, injury, or to care for an immediate family member. Employees accrue 7.38 hours of sick leave on a bi-weekly basis, or 191.88 hours in an annual period. A lack of participation from agencies who were sent the external survey, diminished much, if any ability to provide a contrary understanding of what other departments were experiencing. However, the amount of sick leave accrual rates in the Newark fire Department were found to be consistent or slightly less than the other agencies who responded. Though external participation in the form of the surveys is a definite limitation of this study, most fire chiefs (designees) provided information to support the fact that they do not consistently measure or track sick leave usage on a daily or weekly basis. Many of the fire departments who were sent survey instruments do have attendance-based incentive programs within their respective agencies. As previously stated, the lack of participation and subsequent response from these similar, sample-sized agencies, yielded little to no benefit in the form of tangible data or relevant information. Even though the lack of results influenced the inability to provide numerous additional incentives, it is known that other options do exist. In the case of the Newark Fire Department, all of these incentives would need to be added, revised, or otherwise discussed with the local Union during contract negotiations. However, the Newark Fire Department does have some attendance-based incentives currently in place that employees (who qualify) can exercise. Currently, the best and most effective incentive is of monetary benefit to the individual employee. At the end of every annual period (starting in November) each member can exchange sick leave hours for payment. Each employee who has at minimum 480 hours of sick leave accrual can elect to exchange a specific number of hours for their rate of base-pay. The number or quantity of hours that may be exchanged is based on the number of hours that said employee uses during the previous annual period. Employees who use less hours of sick leave can exchange more hours for pay than the individual employees who use more sick leave. Individuals who have perfect attendance in the way of sick leave hours, can exchange up to 154 hours which is converted at 75 percent. Members are also afforded a

payout option upon their retirement from the department. Even though this incentive is not based on an actual usage to exchange type ratio, the overall number of hours equivalates to more money when they don't use as many hours. Employees who elect to retire after twenty-five (25) years of credit in the retirement system, or who qualify for a disability retirement, may convert unused sick leave to a cash payment of one (1) hour's pay for every two (2) hours of accrued, but unused sick leave. The maximum payment under the provision shall not exceed seventeen thousand five hundred dollars (\$17,500) for any year covered in the collective bargaining agreement.

DISCUSSION

It has been stated that, "...human resource researchers have done relatively few studies to measure the effectiveness of programs and policies designed to improve employee attendance". (Beaton, Dawe, Gaudine, and Saks, 2001). They continued that, "Even more surprising is the lack of studies on attendance programs from the employees' perspective. We know little about how employees feel about programs and policies designed to improve employee attendance..." Fire Departments fall into that category as well. Evidence of this statement was found by reviewing the external surveys from other departments throughout the surveyed criteria. Of the surveys that were returned, most departments were unable or unwilling to answer questions asking for specific sick leave data. Of the departments that had incentive programs in place, several were unable to quantify and report the effectiveness of these programs. The exact purpose of the internal survey in this research was to find out how employees feel about potential programs and to measure the level of buy-in that may be expected if the Newark Fire Department would implement additional incentives. To determine if or how serious a problem exists it would require a department to conduct an individual analysis of its respective usage.

An organizational perception prior to this research was that sick leave usage increased when vacation time was unavailable in the summer months and on weekends. The statement made by Lorenz, a senior career advisor for CareerBuilder.com said that one in four workers report they feel sick days are equivalent to extra vacation days and treat them as such (2005). It is possible that personnel who could not schedule a shift of vacation because of the vacation schedule being full would instead call off duty

stating they were ill. According to the historical data obtained from the payroll department at the Newark Fire Department, the results were not the same as the original perception. Most peak vacation usage months were among the lowest reported sick leave usage and Saturdays ranked as the day of the week with the lowest sick leave use over the past two years.

In further research by McHugh (2011), it was found that a high level of absence was often attributed to the fact that the majority of the employees do not lose financially if they are absent from work. This is an accurate statement according to department statistics and referenced information. The 84-line firefighters absenteeism rate in the year 2017 alone cost the department over \$190,000.00 in lost production. Currently the Newark Fire Department pays significant amounts of overtime in order to sustain operational readiness and minimum staffing. As stated earlier in this research, authors Rhodes and Steers stated “The first major technique for controlling absenteeism relies on reward systems for good attendance”. The research that took place in search of the best system for the Newark Fire Department has surfaced some options and or programs that could be implemented. Those most easy and quickest to implement would be those of a non-monetary nature. These would perhaps, as well, be those that the organization would most likely be willing to implement. Shappi (1988) wrote that good attendance could be rewarded in a tangible or intangible form. Among the rewards included were cash bonuses, sick leaves bonuses, retirement benefits, additional time off, employee recognition, and employee lotteries. Several of Shappi’s suggestions topped the results of this research. The top result was the ability to cash in unused sick leave on an annual basis. This could be justified to the Newark Fire Department more easily than merely offering a bonus or incentive for perfect attendance. The department has been looking into decreasing the rate of sick leave accrual earned per employee each pay cycle. By allowing an employee with perfect attendance or near perfect attendance to return the amount of sick leave to the city in lieu of payment, the department would be assisted in lowering the amount of sick leave currently available for payout/conversion on the books. Another advantage of this program is the department would be buying back an employee’s sick leave earlier and at a lower rate of hourly pay versus later in their respective career which is likely to be much higher. The second most desired or successful program was a financial

incentive for perfect attendance, but according to research, many organizations feel differently. “Some managers object to rewarding employees merely for showing up at work because, presumably this is what you are already paid to do.” (Schappi, 1988, p.127). Dunn and Wilkinson wrote a similar view where they found, “Some managers believe that employees should not receive any additional income to attend work and others felt that many of the attendance bonuses were so small that the value of the scheme was criticized.” (2001, p.229). They further found that some managers felt that financial bonuses to employees sent a signal out that management has given up their right to manage the overall problem.

Most organizations, more than likely, have a sick leave policy but the degree of enforcing it may vary. A well written policy, followed by additional officer training on enforcing the policy and the appropriate use of progressive discipline each rated high in the survey results.

A policy that emerged during the external survey phase of this research was perhaps an effective way to eliminate the entitlement mentality usage of sick leave. To summarize, it allowed five occurrences of sick leave usage. Starting with the sixth occurrence, a firefighter was not granted paid sick leave unless they were absent at least 48 hours. This form of a no-fault plan had an included clause allowing management to make exceptions in a case-by-case basis. Another report was that by providing inducements, that discourage an entitlement mentality at the first symptom (i.e. sneeze), it could be beneficial in curbing the high associated costs of absenteeism. Another success story in the reduction of absenteeism comes from a major defense contractor that conducted a lottery contest for their employees. They experienced a 38% decrease in absenteeism from this lottery alone (Cole, 2002). A lottery for prizes option was included in the surveys that were mailed out. No fire department that reported back had any experience with using a program or incentives such as these. While this may be common in the private sector, it is less likely to be effective or even legal if implemented in the public sector agencies.

In concluding this portion of the discussion, a reduction in the percentage of absenteeism used should not be considered a success without asking an important question first. According to one manager, you must look behind any figures of decline and ask whether your workplace is now a better place to work in terms of morale after an absenteeism reduction (Dunn, Wilkinson, 2001).

The results of the research are different from what was anticipated from the beginning. It was anticipated that sick leave usage was greatest on the weekend and during the peak vacation months, the times when a lot of activities outside of the work place were occurring. According to the results, there are not more firefighters calling off-duty on the weekends and summer vacation months compared to the other days and months. There was however, a significant increase in absenteeism between specific years during the aforementioned time frame associated with this research. Any organization is unlikely to be able to sustain or otherwise support a large increase in absenteeism from year to year on a continued basis.

When the usage totals of the Newark Fire Department were compared to other agencies of similar size, the usage was, in most cases, higher. From the literature review, it was stated that if an employer offers more sick leave to an employee, the more leave, the employee will then take. This was not proven throughout the research conducted within this project. Some of the departments that received less sick leave accrual than the employees of the Newark Fire Department did actually have less usage, but most of the other agencies did not. There was not enough evidence or information to conclusively state that the literature was factual.

A few of the fire departments that responded to the survey questions did state that they had an incentives program to promote attendance. The Newark Fire Department should look at the results of the surveys and the success rates associated with the programs that were questioned. Many of these programs would not be costly to implement, given that any changes would be supported by any local labor union. Some of the policy formulations, changes to existing policies, and training for the officers. Others would be a monetary issue but, some incentives could save the department money in the long term. Based on the results, the Newark Fire Department is not unique or otherwise alone as it relates to the issues associated with employee absenteeism. Many other organizations face the same challenges to decrease unnecessary sick leave usage. If the Newark Fire Department could decrease the absenteeism rate, either through policy changes or incentive programs, the additional implications could be additional staffing to

the apparatus, placing additional apparatus in service on a consistent basis, reducing the amount of temporary transfers, and decreasing the individual stress and work load of each individual of the agency.

One organizational impact of absenteeism is increased operational costs. In the current economic crisis, if revenues cannot sustain an operation, the organization will have no choice but to reduce in one area or another. Examples of areas where reductions are common typically fall into the service or personal categories. Furthermore, this could result in reduced staffing through attrition or potential layoffs, all of which result in an overall reduction in service to the community. This is not a problem isolated to the Newark Fire Department and could be a challenge for any public safety agency throughout the world. The negative effects of unscheduled absenteeism also lead to a decrease in organizational effectiveness and preparedness. For example, training programs and courses are affected when employees miss training and fail to complete upon their return to work. The results of this research are inconsistent with the research of Puknaitis (2000), and Mueller (2002), which indicated positive results from good attendance incentive programs. After the implementation of a good attendance incentive program, unscheduled absenteeism increased overall. There was less increase among employees eligible to participate in the incentive program. This may be a result of the incentive, or it may be that these employees are less prone to use time off, unscheduled or otherwise. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was intended to reduce unscheduled absenteeism by encouraging the member to apply for and subsequently schedule known time off. This would benefit management in regards to potential transfers (temporary) or to find alternative methods as they relate to staffing and operational readiness. There is also a possibility that the benefits associated with the Family Medical Leave Act have been used, whereas before, they were not.

A disconnect exists between values and behaviors as it relates to attendance. While the majority of the participants identify that attendance is important, most of the data suggests that the agencies surveyed do not track or otherwise manage this aspect of human resources on a daily and weekly basis. Maybe staffing levels are more crucial to the Newark Fire Department than to the rest of the agencies who

were surveyed? Developing clear, succinct policies and the training all of members, not just officers would potentially lend success to the endeavor of reducing unscheduled absenteeism.

The fire service has evolved not only in its technical and practical application of service provided to the public, but also in its membership. Individuals seeking to make a career out of being a member of the fire service must be willing to accept that workplace attendance is not only an expectation of the employer, but it also an expectation of the community and crucial to the overall mission of preparedness and emergency response.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are the next steps in the quest to find alternatives, incentives, or programs that would address or otherwise reduce the use of unscheduled sick leave usage within the Newark Fire Department. The problem this study addressed was the use of unscheduled sick leave within the Newark Fire Department. As earlier stated, if unscheduled sick leave could be reduced, the results would allow the Newark Fire Department to increase staffing, place additional resources in service, increase training opportunities, increase efficiency, and alleviate some of the financial burden associated with overtime for staffing. The overall purpose of this study was to identify strategies, incentives, and programs that would have a positive impact on reducing leave usage and unscheduled absenteeism within the agency. The following recommendations from this research could be presented to the fire department, the collective bargaining unit, and the city administration for consideration. These findings could result in future policy changes, contract negotiations, or programs that provide additional incentive to the individual members as well as to satisfy some of the challenges faced by the fire department management.

While researching programs or policies in the CBA that could actually increase absenteeism within the Newark Fire Department, it was realized that numerous articles in the collective bargaining do in fact lead to an increased use of unplanned sick leave. These contractual benefits came from the negotiation process between the union and the city; therefore, these provisions must be upheld by management, regardless of the effect on staffing. In most, if not all instances, contractual language supersedes any policy or rule of put in place by the administrative officers. In general, the Newark Fire Department has agreed to meet the employees demands for new or improved benefits in order to circumvent significant increases in an employee's hourly rate and annual salary. The only way to potentially revise or remove these incentives would be during the process of formal negotiations with the union.

Results of the survey led to discussion that focused on the use of a sick leave bank to allow employees to draw leave in the event that they had used all of their sick leave accruals. Again, this aspect is addressed in the collective bargaining agreement and contains specific language in regards to individual

worker's ability to accrue sick leave and the subsequent use thereof. In fact, this alternative (if possible) would likely increase employee absenteeism because it would be viewed along the lines of a PTO, or paid time off situation. Paid time off scenarios allow members to take time regardless of the nature and in most cases include sick time as well as vacation time. Without conducting further research on this topic, it would likely not remedy or solve the current unscheduled absenteeism issue because of the ambiguity associated with PTO. Paid time off is generally found in more of the private sector agencies, and even though staffing may be crucial to their respective missions, it is not near as critical as staffing for emergency services. Almost all of the agencies surveyed had less sick leave usage when compared to the Newark Fire Department; however, most did not have contractual language that placed restriction on management and the overall control thereof.

The final research question yielded several additional recommendations. Based on the results from the external surveys, the top programs from outside departments that had the most success in reducing unscheduled absenteeism were of a non-monetary nature. In brief, none of the successful alternatives further provided financial reward or compensation to their members simply because they came to work as expected. The most successful strategy was to require an employee to provide supporting documentation for the use of sick leave given that the situation satisfied certain criteria. Criterion varied, but in most cases, it was when management (i.e. Fire Chief or HR) identified a pattern of excessive, trending, or patterned use of sick leave. This happens to be already in place within the Newark Fire Department and is included within the provisions of the collective bargaining agreement and is furthermore supported by standard operating procedure. As it relates to this research and more importantly, the associated findings (results) the Newark Fire Department might best benefit from and should consider negotiating some of the contractual provisions out of any future agreement. The provisions included within the CBA have no consideration or "out-option" that management may exercise when issues such as absenteeism are identified or potentially addressed. The executive board members are and have been open to discuss this issue with management; however, no agreement has surfaced in regards to the implementation of effective resolve. Contractual provisions can be viewed from various

perspectives, but in most cases limit management's ability to control or otherwise change operating practices in order to best serve the agency, community, and every individual member.

Following an internal survey to the members of the department, the results of the strategies that the firefighters stated would be effective at reducing individual rate of absenteeism and the strategies that management should initiate were closely aligned. The top response for a program on the internal surveys was to allow employees to cash in unused sick leave hours more than once through the annual period. Currently, members are only permitted to exercise this benefit once in annual period and it occurs in the last quarter of the fiscal year. Historically, this has been done at this time because the amount of cash hours an employee can submit is based on how many hours they have used. Another incentive that ranked atop the results from the members was to provide additional paid time off for any member who achieves near perfect attendance. This may be a beneficial option for other options, but in simplicity, detracts from the overall goal of what this research project was designed to produce in the form of reducing absenteeism, not increasing it. Regardless of the results acquired, the Newark Fire Department should consider meeting with the union prior to negotiations in order to communicate potential alternatives ahead of the formal process.

Future areas of interest for possible research include the use of a short-term disability policy for any member who potentially qualifies. This aspect is addressed currently through the FMLA standards, but may be of additional benefit if further defined by internal practice when appropriate. Lastly, future research may be appropriate in regards to providing further definition of what actually constitutes sick leave abuse and furthermore would truly "quantify" any specific scenario for all relevant parties. This would be extremely beneficial for any case that is presented to a neutral party (i.e. arbitrator) and would save countless hours of testimony that is spent to convince said neutral party as to the matter before them when accompanied with charges of abuse. Individuals who wish or identify a need to research sick leave programs within their respective organizations should clearly define and focus in on a specific aspect of sick leave abuse. In general, too many factors influence this area that ultimately and comprehensively effects unscheduled absenteeism. Each agency is different as it relates to this issue; therefore, the specific

criteria needs to be isolated for the internal measurement of the problem and not focus on how an individual viewpoints, constraints, or other perspectives feel about the topic in general.

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APPENDIX 1-SICK LEAVE COMPARISON DATA

Weekday	2017	2018	Total
Sunday	650.00	799.07	1449.07
Monday	837.15	1086.50	1923.65
Tuesday	1121.25	1221.25	2342.50
Wednesday	1001.50	1308.25	2309.75
Thursday	1070.00	1293.00	2363.00
Friday	1040.50	1292.50	2333.00
Saturday	959.60	964.75	1924.35
Total Days of Week	6680.00	7966.00	14645.32
Months of the Year	2017	2018	Total
January	902.00	948.00	1850.00
February	560.00	605.00	1165.00
March	450.00	502.00	952.00
April	520.00	608.50	1128.50
May	350.00	385.00	735.00
June	466.50	550.00	1016.50
July	440.50	1097.25	1537.75
August	283.25	315.00	598.25
September	684.75	715.00	1399.75
October	705.00	755.00	1460.00
November	538.50	580.25	1118.75
December	1129.50	905.00	2034.50
Total All Months	6680.00	7966.00	14645.32

APPENDIX 3-SURVEY LETTER

EXTERNAL SURVEY LETTER

01 April 2020

Dear Fire Service Professional,

I am writing this letter in an attempt to gather information for a research project that I am completing as part of the Ohio Fire Executive (OFE) Program. The OFE program was created and is administered by the Ohio Fire Chief's Association Charitable Trust and is an executive development program that assesses, enhances, and refines the leadership abilities of its participants. The OFE curriculum includes a multitude of learning modules centered on Executive Leadership, Self-Analysis, and Leading Change and are emphasized throughout this program. The OFE program has received national attention and recognition for its course excellence.

To assist my research in finding strategies to reduce absenteeism, I have included a survey that I am asking you to fill out and return to me. The results of the returned surveys will be a major contribution to my research. The purpose of the survey is to find programs, policies, procedures, benefits and/or alternatives that other agencies have in place in order to ultimately recommend and potentially implement within the Newark Fire Department.

The Newark Fire Department serves the City of Newark as well as various boundaries within Licking County, OH. I currently service the fire division as the Deputy Fire Chief and would greatly appreciate your efforts as they relate to potentially improving my department. I am asking that you please take a few minutes to complete the survey (enclosed) and return to my attention no later than December 1, 2020. All information that you elect to share with my for the purposes of this project will remain confidential and will not be shared without written consent. Thank you in advance for taking the time to assist me with this research project.

Respectfully,

Brandon E. Metzger
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Newark, OH 43055
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APPENDIX 4-EXTERNAL SURVEY

Ohio Fire Executive Program Applied Research Absenteeism Survey

Please indicate from the choices below, each of the programs, policies, procedures, or benefits that your department has previously had or currently uses to assist in a reduction of the absenteeism rate in your organization and the success your department has experienced with each choice. Indicate your response by circling the most applicable response.

		N/A= Not Applicable		1= Unsuccessful		2= Minimal Success		3= Moderate Success		4= Mostly Successful		5= Extremely Successful
A no-fault plan that specifies a set number of allowable occurrences per specified time period		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Ability to cash-in any unused sick leave		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Officer training on enforcing sick leave policies		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Additional time off for perfect attendance		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Cash bonuses, financial incentives for perfect attendance		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Inability to sign up for overtime if recently absent		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Must report off directly to an officer		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Progressive disciplinary actions taken		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Retirement benefits and incentives		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Return to work meeting required with supervisor		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Sick leave policy in place and enforced		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Requirement of documentation from physician to support leave usage		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					
Year-end recognition ceremony for no use		N/A	1	2	3	4	5					

Other, please specify: _____

