

Lake Havasu Fire Fighters Send ICMA Packing

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— IAFF General President
Harold Schaitberger

IAFF affiliates across the country are facing a vexing foe — the anti-labor consulting arm of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA).

But one affiliate — Lake Havasu, AZ Local 2974 — provided a textbook assault on the ICMA’s attempt to overhaul the western Arizona city’s fire operations.

“This is a very significant victory for us and, I hope, for all IAFF members,” says Lake Havasu Local 2974 President Clint Nelson.

Earlier this year, ICMA Consulting Services began marketing its “Public Safety Operational Analysis,” a so-called study of fire departments that relies on misleading data to convince public officials that they can safely reduce fire department staffing.

“The ICMA wants simply to reduce staffing, and that jeopardizes public safety,” says IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger. “The ICMA’s proposals aren’t just bad; they’re dangerous.”

The ICMA is also a vocal advocate of the public safety officer concept, which proposes combining the jobs of a fire fighter and police officer, and employs one person to do both.

The ICMA surfaced in Lake Havasu in July, when Lake Havasu City Manager Richard Kaffenberger urged the Lake Havasu City Council to approve a \$58,000 contract to review its fire and police operations. ICMA Consulting Services completed its report in July 2009, with a radical recommendation to eliminate 48-hour shifts and replace them with 12-hour shifts. In the ICMA’s distorted view, the City would increase the productivity of its fire fighters by eliminating overnight duty, Nelson says.

Once Nelson got hold of ICMA’s recommendations, he and his executive

board proceeded to chip away at any credibility the review may have had.

“Clint Nelson and his executive board did an incredible job of informing their friendly council members on the important issues,” says Tim Hill, president of the Professional Fire Fighters of Arizona.

While ICMA argued that Lake Havasu would save money by switching to 12-hour shifts, Local 2974 showed it would, in fact, increase the city’s costs by \$1 million per year because it would need to add an additional 10 fire fighters to its 85-member department.

The ICMA failed to point out that there is no way to switch to 12-hour shifts and maintain the department’s current shift staffing. Its proposed change would, in effect, reduce staffing.

The message resonated with elected officials.

“In these economic times, I don’t think there’s much interest in increasing costs,” Nelson says.

Because ICMA reviewed and presented a limited amount of data in its report, it did not provide a true picture of fire department services. In its review of Lake Havasu, it advocated for staffing reductions based on its belief that fire fighters weren’t busy because some stations made just a handful of calls in a day.

But that conclusion does not account for time spent on other duties, including training, public service events and vehicle maintenance.

“These professed reviews are hatchet jobs intended to convince gullible city managers and councils that they can make deep cuts in personnel and service and save money. It’s short-sighted and unsafe,” Schaitberger says.

ICMA reports are popping up with increasing frequency in other parts of the United States. ICMA appears to be using the same report from Lake Havasu in other cities. In fact, on occasion, it has failed to even change data from city to city. ICMA has released these reports in Alameda, California; Broken Arrow, Oklahoma; and Novi, Michigan, just this year.

During a July 28 public meeting in Lake Havasu, one member of the City Council says she felt the ICMA simply copied a previous review it had done for public officials in Alameda.

“The message is clear — don’t let ICMA in the door,” says Schaitberger. “We need to know when they come calling so we can assist our locals in sending them packing.”

Ultimately, Nelson says, Local 2974 succeeded in thwarting the city manager and ICMA because it had allies on the City Council who would listen to their arguments.

“This shows how important political action is. We built relationships, we worked with our friendly City Council members and sat down with them to go over the report so they could understand why it was wrong,” Nelson says. ■

A link to a video and a transcript of the City Council meeting is at:
http://lakehavasucity.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=3