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# The Metro Section

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The New York Times

## *Fire Department Is Investigated Over Bias in Hiring Practices*

By MICHELLE O'DONNELL

The United States Department of Justice is investigating whether the New York City Fire Department's hiring practices discriminate against black and Hispanic firefighting candidates, city and federal officials said yesterday.

Lawyers for the city were informed of the inquiry in a letter they received last week, Kate O'Brien Ahlers, a spokeswoman for the city's Law Department, said yesterday. Ms. Ahlers said the letter, a notification about the inquiry, was being reviewed by lawyers for the city.

A spokesman for the Justice Department confirmed that an investigation had been opened but could not comment on what instigated it. The investigation was first reported by WNBC-TV.

Capt. Paul Washington, the president of the Vulcan Society, a fraternal organization of black firefighters with about 300 members, said the inquiry was begun after black firefighters filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission two years ago.

In that complaint, the black firefighters, who are represented by the Center for Constitutional Rights, said the Fire Department's testing methods violated the civil rights of black applicants. Captain Washington said the department uses a written test that weeds out qualified black candidates, who otherwise

score high on the physical exam.

Yesterday, Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta pledged to cooperate with federal investigators. "We want a department that reflects the communities we serve, and we are working vigorously to achieve this goal," he said in a statement.

Of the roughly 11,500 firefighters and fire officers in the department, about 92 percent are white, said Virginia Lam, a spokeswoman for the department. Blacks account for 3 percent, she said.

Those numbers have remained roughly the same since 2001, when an audit by the city's Equal Employment Practices Commission recommended that the department enact sweeping changes in how it recruits and hires minority candidates.

Some of the recommendations were enacted, including more aggressive recruiting in minority neighborhoods. The commission recommended that the department offer more frequent tests, as black candidates who pass often score in the lower brackets, and therefore must wait longer than whites to be hired.

Since 2000 the department has doubled the number of minority candidates it hired from 1990 to 1999, due mainly to an increase in the number of Hispanic firefighters, but it has remained mostly white.

From 2000 to the present, of the 4,994 firefighters hired, 778 were minorities, department statistics show. From 1990 to 1999, of the 4,948 firefighters 271 were minorities, the statistics show.

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