

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL CITY OF BALTIMORE



Isabel Mercedes Cumming
Inspector General

Investigative Report Synopsis

OIG Case # 21-0023-I

Issued: August 4, 2021



OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL
Isabel Mercedes Cumming, Inspector General
City Hall, Suite 635
100 N. Holliday Street
Baltimore, MD 21202



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Dear Citizens of Baltimore City,

The Mission of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is to promote accountability, efficiency, and integrity in City government, as well as to investigate complaints of fraud, financial waste, and abuse. At times the OIG receives complaints regarding Baltimore City policies that may be implemented in a way that could be perceived as wasteful.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) received a complaint requesting an investigation into the implementation of the Baltimore City Fire Department's (BCFD) take-home vehicle policy. The complainant alleged financial waste and possible misuse of City-owned vehicles by BCFD members as a result of a lack of oversight and the wasteful execution of the take-home vehicle policy. Specifically, it was alleged members of the BCFD are assigned take-home vehicles without justification. Further, it was alleged the Chief of the BCFD, amended the BCFD take-home vehicle policy to allow specific employees who live a significant distance from Baltimore City and outside the state of Maryland the use of City-owned vehicles to commute to and from work.

The OIG reviewed the BCFD Manual of Procedure (MOP) take-home vehicle policy.¹ According to the MOP, the Chief of the BCFD or their designee has the sole authority to assign take-home vehicles, but BCFD members may only use a take-home vehicle during their designated on-call cycle.² On-call staff assist with BCFD operations when resources and personnel are limited. Typically, on-call BCFD employees with 24-hour emergency response obligations who reside in the City of Baltimore or within 60 miles of a BCFD fire station are eligible for a take-home vehicle assignment.³

BCFD provided the OIG with a list of assigned take-home vehicles and member commuting information, which reflected the distance from a member's residence to the closest fire station. As of November 16, 2020, the BCFD had 35 assigned take-home vehicles. The OIG requested the Department of General Services (DGS) to conduct a comprehensive analysis of BCFD's vehicle take-home list and member commuting data. DGS examined the information and used data from the FASTER⁴ system to determine overall operating costs for each take-home vehicle.

According to DGS's report, the annual estimated maintenance and repair expenses for all 35 take-home vehicles is \$165,770.47, with a life to date cost of \$775,168.17.⁵ Seven vehicles are assigned to BCFD members who travel more than 35 miles one-way from work to residences outside of Maryland, for a

¹ BCFD Manual of Procedure Policy #415.

² "On call" means an employee must be accessible, available, and able to report for duty if called.

³ The member is not required to be within 60 miles of their assigned BCFD station; any BCFD station will suffice. BCFD uses Google Maps to calculate the driving distance between a member's home and the closest BCFD fire station.

⁴ FASTER is software used by DGS for City fleet asset management.

⁵ Life to date refers to the vehicle maintenance costs associated with each vehicle since it was procured.

REPORT FRAUD, WASTE AND ABUSE

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combined total of 102,691 miles a year.⁶ The annual estimated maintenance and repair costs for these seven take-home vehicles alone is \$63,096.76.

Background

According to the BCFD 2020 Annual Report, BCFD members service Baltimore City residents 24-hours a day, seven days a week. Their work is spread across four shifts, with each shift staffed by one Shift Commander, six Suppression Battalion Chiefs, and one Emergency Medical Services Battalion Chief.⁷

According to the MOP, BCFD employees are eligible for take-home vehicles so members can respond to emergency calls and other BCFD-related functions quickly. Take-home vehicle eligibility applies to BCFD members whose work assignments include weekends, holidays, after-hours, on-call emergency, or investigative response requirements during their scheduled on-call cycle. Furthermore, BCFD members eligible for take-home vehicles must live within 60 miles of the closest BCFD station. In addition, take-home vehicles are automatically assigned to BCFD employees who hold the rank of Deputy Chief and above.⁸ Authorization for BCFD employees to use City-owned vehicles to commute to and from work is at the discretion of the BCFD Chief or his/her designee.

Methodology

The OIG gathered information from City employees pertaining to City vehicle policies, maintenance procedures and overall costs. This included interviewing a City Policy Analyst and a DGS Fleet Maintenance Division employee about the administrative and operational aspects of the BCFD take-home vehicle policy and vehicle usage data and maintenance records respectively. The OIG independently reviewed DGS's report pertaining to BCFD's take-home vehicle usage and costs. The BCFD relevant member job classifications were reviewed as well as justifications for usage of take-home vehicles. The OIG also compared the BCFD take-home vehicle policy to similar policies from other Maryland municipalities. Lastly, to understand the rationale behind the policy and its implementation, the OIG interviewed the BCFD Chief.

Limitations

The OIG's analysis of the BCFD's take-home vehicle data usage relied upon the information provided by DGS via the FASTER system on November 16, 2020. The OIG used google maps data and information provided by other City agencies because BCFD take-home vehicles are not installed with global positioning systems (GPS). The GPS devices would have assisted with accurately tracking vehicle use and travel distances. According to the BCFD Chief, GPS devices were uninstalled from BCFD take-home vehicles because their implementation drained the vehicle batteries. The OIG was unable to review any prior BCFD take-home vehicle policies to assess any changes because none were provided by BCFD when requested, and none were available via an open-source search.

⁶There is also one member who lives within the state of Maryland but travels more than 35 miles to work.

⁷The BCFD 2020 Annual Report can be accessed at:

<https://fire.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/BCFD%202020%20Annual%20Report%20B.A.%20April%201.pdf>.

⁸The MOP further provides that if the member holding the rank of Deputy Chief or above resides outside the specified distance parameters, the member shall leave the take-home vehicle at the BCFD station nearest his/her home and commute the remainder of the distance by his/her personal vehicle.

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OIG INVESTIGATION

Vehicle Maintenance & Usage Monitoring

DGS manages all City-owned vehicle purchases, including BCFD's.⁹ Each new vehicle is purchased with a three-year or 36,000-mile warranty that does not include coverage for brakes, oil changes, or tires. According to a DGS Fleet Maintenance employee, City-owned vehicles have a specific cost associated with each mile traveled, known as the cost per mile. They can thus reach 36,000 miles before three years of ownership, ending the manufacturer's warranty coverage and resulting in the City paying for repairs.

Every City vehicle is installed with a fuel monitoring device¹⁰ that records the odometer reading and fueling data whenever an employee refuels at a DGS gas station. The information collected by each fuel monitoring device is uploaded in the FASTER system, which tracks vehicle data including maintenance, warranties, and repairs. Additionally, the FASTER system tracks each vehicle's operational costs.¹¹

Take-Home Vehicle Assignment

According to the BCFD Chief, the severity of an emergency, or the occurrence of simultaneous emergencies, determines whether on-call staff with take-home vehicles are required to report. The BCFD Chief acknowledged that simultaneous emergencies are a rare occurrence.

The MOP provides that assigned take-home vehicles are restricted to official use and should not be used for personal business, except for occasional routine errands while commuting to or from work. However, during his interview, the BCFD Chief acknowledged a more relaxed policy. For example, members are allowed to travel to restaurants with their family in their take-home vehicle to ensure a quick response if they are called for an emergency. The BCFD Chief acknowledged that the on-call member's family may need to accompany the member to an emergency in those scenarios. The MOP does not specify who is permitted to ride in a City-owned vehicle; this may present a risk management concern for the City.

Take-Home Vehicle Analysis

On November 16, 2020, at the OIG's request DGS provided an exhaustive report of BCFD's assigned take-home vehicles using data recorded in the FASTER system. According to the report, BCFD has a total of 35 take-home vehicles designated for assignment.¹² Each member's commuting mileage was calculated by measuring the distance from the member's residence to the closest BCFD station using Google Maps. The nearest BCFD station is not always the member's assigned station. The OIG's analysis of the report identified that take-home vehicle maintenance, repair, fuel, and usage costs the City an estimated \$165,770.47 annually. The life to date costs are an estimated \$775,168.17, as illustrated in Table 1.

⁹ BCFD vehicles that are acquired using federal grant funding are still managed by DGS. DGS estimates that newly acquired City-owned vehicles will accumulate 12,000 miles per year, based on the size of Baltimore City, and will last six to ten years. Applies to vehicles purchased under the City's master lease contract—Baltimore City Contract # B50005011

¹⁰ DGS utilizes the E.J. Ward fuel management system to analyze fueling transaction details.

¹¹ Operational costs include routine maintenance, corrective repairs, accidents and damages, and fuel.

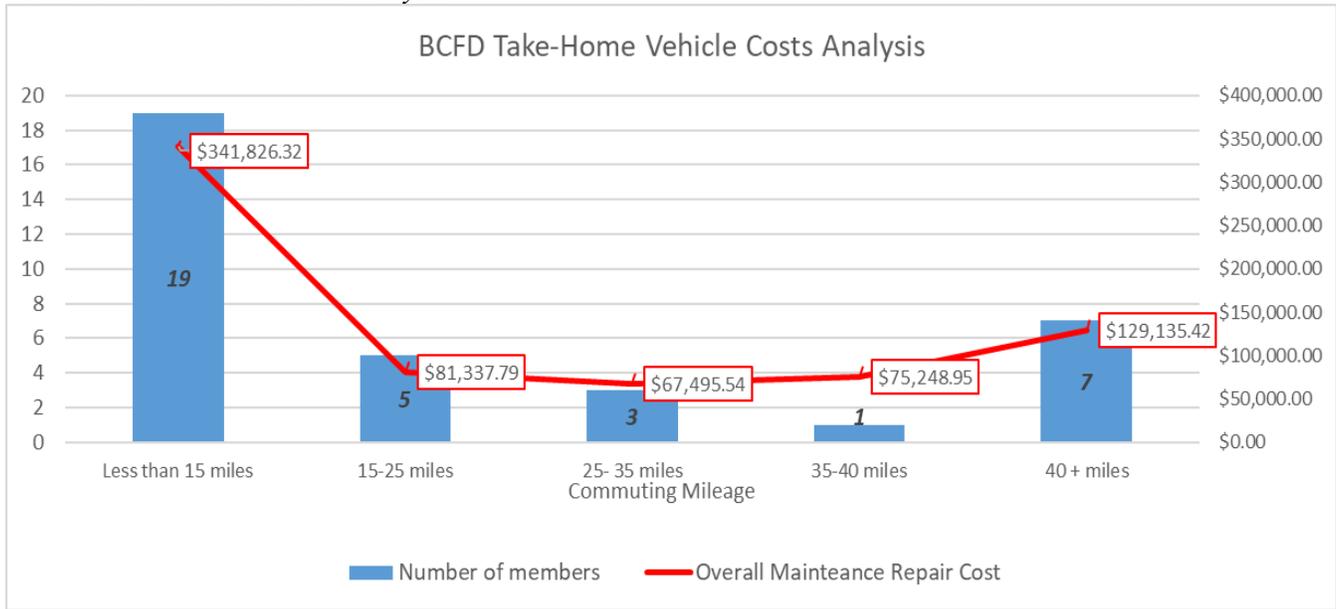
¹² Two out of the thirty-seven vehicles are reserved for rotating staff that are on-call.

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Table 1: BCFD Vehicle Cost Analysis



Further analysis of the report determined seven of the take-home vehicles are assigned to BCFD members who travel to work from out-of-state residences. One who travels a 59.4 mile commute each way from Queen Anne’s County, Maryland. Combined, the seven members who live out of state commute approximately 102,691 miles a year, with \$63,096.76 in annual estimated maintenance and repair costs.

Further, the OIG learned that three of BCFD’s four Shift Commanders live out of state. Shift Commanders work 24-hour rotating shifts approximately eight to ten days per month. As a result, Shift Commanders’ schedules require that they commute in and out of the City 10-15 days per month.¹³ Shift Commanders are assigned a take-home vehicle in addition to a separate vehicle that the Shift Commander’s Office uses for on-duty travel. According to the BCFD Chief, a Shift Commander would utilize their assigned take-home vehicle to respond to an on-call emergency.

The Policy Analyst advised the OIG that a BCFD member who resides out of state cannot reasonably be expected to quickly respond to a City emergency using a take-home vehicle or provide an immediate impact on any BCFD operations. Further, take-home vehicles used to travel across jurisdictional lines present a potential risk and liability to the City. According to the BCFD Chief, senior members who live out of state and respond to an emergency are briefed about the situation while they are in route and take charge once they arrive on the scene.

Other Municipalities’ Take-Home Vehicle Policy

According to the Policy Analyst, typically police and fire personnel commute an average of a 25 to 30-mile radius from the jurisdiction line to the member’s residence as a best practice. The standard usually requires the member to park their assigned vehicle at the nearest police or fire station within the jurisdiction. The OIG reviewed the take-home vehicle policies of other Maryland municipalities, including

¹³ BCFD Shift Commanders’ rotating schedule consist of working 24-hours on, 24-hours off, 24-hours on then receiving five consecutive days off. Shift Commanders travel home on their off days.

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Bowie, Laurel, and Greenbelt. The OIG confirmed that local municipalities typically set the distance requirements based on the fire station geographically closest to an employee's home and require the member to park their assigned vehicle at that station and drive their personal vehicle the remainder of the way home. According to the BCFD Chief, he did not enforce local municipal commuting practices because BCFD personnel are not always assigned to the nearest fire station to their home.

The OIG informed the BCFD Chief that other municipalities justify an employee's need for a take-home vehicle based on the number of incidents they respond to in a month. The BCFD Chief responded that BCFD's justification for assigning a take-home vehicle "is not based on a calculation but is based on the qualifying perspective of the need." The BCFD Chief also stated assigning take-home vehicles creates an obligation for BCFD members to respond to calls for assistance. The BCFD Chief stated he is willing to scrutinize the current take-home vehicle list further and reevaluate the number of needed assignments.

INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS

Under the MOP, take-home vehicles are assigned to BCFD members at the discretion of the BCFD Chief. Additionally, the MOP specifies that BCFD members whose assignment includes on-call emergencies or on-call investigative response requirements are eligible to be assigned a take-home.

The BCFD Chief reported to the OIG that the need for on-call staff to respond to an emergency depends on the severity and simultaneity of incidents, though acknowledged that simultaneous emergencies are rare. Chief Ford stated he is willing to scrutinize the current take-home vehicle list to reevaluate the number of needed assignments.

The OIG investigation discovered that BCFD Shift Commanders are assigned a take-home vehicle in addition to a separate vehicle that the Shift Commander's Office uses for on-duty travel. According to Chief Ford, a Shift Commander would utilize their assigned take-home vehicle to respond to an on-call emergency.

According to a Fleet Maintenance employee, take-home vehicles decrease the City's ability to contain the maintenance cost within the first three years of the manufacturer's warranty because the added commuter miles on those vehicles can take them out of the three-year warranty period. The OIG determined that the maintenance, repair, fuel, and usage of the 35 BCHD take-home vehicles cost the City an estimated \$165,770.47 annually, with the life to date costs an estimated \$775,168.17.

Sincerely,



Isabel Mercedes Cumming, Inspector General
Office of the Inspector General

Cc: Hon. Brandon Scott, Mayor of Baltimore City
Hon. Nick Mosby, President, City Council
Hon. Bill Henry, Baltimore City Comptroller
Honorable Members of the Baltimore City Council
Hon. Jim Shea, City Solicitor

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