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The FDNY set two marks for safety in 2012, records show.

City set two fire safety records

BY JOSEPH MALLIA
joseph.mallia@newsday.com

New York City officials said yesterday that 2012 was a banner year for fire safety, with two all-time annual lows: for the fewest civilian fire deaths and the fastest average ambulance response time for life-threatening medical emergencies.

The improvements were notable in part because they occurred during a year that brought superstorm Sandy's floods, high winds and power outages, city officials said.

There were 58 fire deaths in New York City in 2012, compared with the previous record low of 62 in 2010, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Fire Commissioner Salvatore Cassano said in a news conference. Bloomberg said firefighters, EMTs and paramedics deserved credit for continuing to improve their performance, as they risked their own lives to save others.

The FDNY's Emergency Medical Service shaved one second from its previous record-low average for the most serious medical responses, with an average of 6 minutes, 30 seconds, for 2012, the officials said. The previous low came in 2011. Those high-risk, or Segment 1-3, calls, include cardiac arrest, unconscious and choking patients.

With record low numbers "of murders and shootings, and the fewest fire deaths in our city's history, 2012 was a historic year for public safety," Bloomberg said.

He said demand for fire department services has increased in recent years "and despite a devastating storm that taxed the department at every level, we have continued to improve on our core missions of responding quickly to medical emergencies and reducing fire-related deaths."

Fire deaths declined 12 percent in 2012 compared with 2011, when there were 66 deaths; last year was the seventh in a row with fewer than 100, the city said.

In 79 percent of 2012's fatal fires — and 46 of the 58 fire-related deaths — there was no working smoke detector present; and seniors were the largest mortality group, the city said. Twenty-five of those who died were 70 or older, the city said.

The top causes of fatal fires in 2012 were accidental electrical fires (17 deaths), smoking (15 deaths), incendiary fires (nine deaths) and cooking-related blazes (seven deaths).

In fire responses, structural fire response time in 2012 averaged 4:04, two seconds slower than 2011, "due in part to the large call volume that occurred during and after Hurricane Sandy, when the FDNY responded to nearly 100 serious structural fires," officials said.

The ambulance response time record "was achieved by EMS despite a 3.4 percent increase in overall call volume — and a record-setting 1.3 million calls handled," a statement said.

UNITED IN SONG

Labor Chorus members sing to keep union spirit alive

BY TINA SUSMAN
Los Angeles Times

It was the fifth time that evening the New York City Labor Chorus had gone through "The Ballad of Joe Hill" — a six-verse hymn to the ill-fated unionist — and signs of weariness were showing among the singers.

A soprano rolled her eyes. An alto missed a note. One woman, tired of standing, plopped into a chair.

But that didn't stop the dozens of mostly senior-aged workers and retirees — many in their 70s and some in their 80s — from gamely launching into a sixth go-round.

Not so long ago, the Occupy Wall Street protests against corporate fat cats brought thousands of young people to the streets of lower Manhattan, where the singers were practicing. Inside the donated rehearsal space in the United Federation of Teachers building, however, the 99 percent were decidedly more mature.

Take Tom Karlson, whose parents "ran in communist circles." As a kid, he spent time at camps catering to society's left wing, like Wyandot and Kinderland, where songs like "Freedom Train" were sung around the campfire.

Three years ago, Karlson, 70, tried out for the Labor Chorus and was accepted.

He sings in the bass section, hiding a secret. "I can't read a lick of music. I just hold the paper in front of me."

Longtime members joke that when the chorus was born 21 years ago, if you could sing in the shower, you were in. "We sounded good, but it was more like a sing-along-type thing," said Barbara Bailey, 74, president of the non-profit chorus and one of the three unionists who founded the group as a way to energize New York's shop stewards.

Back then, it wasn't difficult to recruit people with the thought of belting anthems celebrating social justice, peace and workers' rights.

The chorus has evolved. It is still composed mostly of people with no professional musical experience, but it sings everywhere — in Cuba, Sweden, Wales, and the 1992 Democratic convention.

On Nov. 26, it recorded a jazzed-up version of "The Ballad of Joe Hill." It shared the stage at Carnegie Hall in 1998 with Harry Belafonte; sang at Pete Seeger's 90th birthday celebration at Madison Square Garden in 2009; and it has released several CDs.

But getting today's overscheduled working masses to devote Monday evenings isn't easy. Jana Ballard, 37, had never heard of the chorus

when a friend told her of its search for a conductor three years ago. She got the job.

Auditions continue even as union ranks in the United States fall, from 20.1 percent in 1983 to 11.8 percent today, federal figures show.

"It's hard to break through," said Jeff Vogel, who has been with the group since the start and is publicity director.

He sees an expanded repertoire as part of the solution. Last year he talked the group into tackling Queen's "We Are the Champions" — with some tweaks: "No time for losers 'cause we are the champions of the world" became "We've got the power 'cause we are the workers of the world."

Vogel was one of about 40 people who showed up for the chorus' first audition in September 1991. Nobody was turned away.

Last year, five of the 15 aspiring singers made the cut, and Ballard had to tell the others. "It's a really horrible phone conversation, and because they're older than me, it's like I'm breaking a grandmother's heart," she said.

She and the accompanist, keyboardist Dennis Nelson, are the only paid members.

The singers range in age from about 40 to 80-plus and are a potpourri of races and ethnic backgrounds.

Just how long the songs will go on is anyone's guess.

"Very few young people would stop and listen to us, but now they do," Ballard said. "They'll be the next people who carry the torch."