



By Lance Murphey

Jerry Crawford (right) chats with firefighter Frank Beach and Battalion Chief Gina Sweat at Station 11, 1826 Union, in Midtown. Crawford moved up through the ranks to be the mayor's nominee for director of fire services.

Crawford's long experience draws praise

By Laura Coleman Noeth
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It was the church where he was baptized, for Pete's sake, where the teenager saw flames that night 33 years ago. So Jerry Crawford grabbed a hose and volunteered to help the Somerville, Tenn., firefighters.

Before that night, it had never occurred to Crawford that he'd be a firefighter.

After that night, there was no doubt what he'd do the rest of his life.

On Tuesday, Crawford, 49, hanging out at the Union Avenue firehouse where he spent six years of his 26-year Memphis Fire Department career, was exuberant over his nomination as the city's fire services director.

The City Council must confirm his nomination.

Crawford still lives in Fayette County, but said he's assured Mayor Willie Herenton that he'll move to Memphis to fulfill the residency requirement for mayoral appointees.

He said he'll do that in about 30 days.

Councilman Brent Taylor said Crawford's residency could hold up the appointment.

"That's not going to fly," Taylor said. "The mayor knows that. I don't know why the mayor would nominate someone who lives in Fayette County."

But others, including Councilman Jack Sammons and Terry Oldham, president of the Memphis Firefighters Association, applauded the choice.

"I think Jerry Crawford is a professional," Sammons said. "He's highly respected within the Fire Department."

Oldham praised Crawford for his experience, expertise and ability to understand firefighters' concerns.

"He's somebody who's been a firefighter, who has experience on the hose."

Oldham also praised Crawford's management style.

"Lots of people, when they get in certain positions, don't have common sense about things, but Jerry does. He can sit down and think things out and use common sense in his decisions."

If Crawford's appointment is confirmed, his annual salary will be \$110,257, the same as retiring director Chester Anderson's.

The head of one of the nation's 28 rescue task forces, Crawford listed improved disaster preparedness and homeland security among his priorities and said he'd use federal money instead of city funds to accomplish them.

He also wants to restore 100 positions so the department reaches its full, 1,656-member staffing level.

By the end of next year, he wants all 56 engine companies to have a thermal imaging camera, a \$10,000 piece of equipment that allows firefighters to see through smoke.

And he pledged to show up at all major fires and at those in which a firefighter is injured or killed.

It was at one of those fires, on June 16, when Crawford made what he said was the toughest decision he's made as a firefighter.

He had to order firefighters out of a burning Family Dollar Store in Frayser, and they had to do what no firefighter can imagine: leave a fatally injured comrade in the flames. Lt. Trent Kirk and Pvt. Charles Zachary were killed.

Because he was in charge, he had to have a "strong presence" at that moment, he said. But, a few days later, he felt "overwhelming grief" on learning that the fire had been set.

An internal report on the department's efforts at that fire was forwarded to City Atty. Robert Spence Tuesday. Because it's part of the criminal investigation on the arson case, it won't be released, Crawford said.

If not for another horrific event, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the Pentagon, Crawford might have given up on his longtime desire to head the department.

As head of Tennessee Task Force One, a group of firefighters, medical workers and others, Crawford was moved by what he saw at the Pentagon.

"It reinvigorated me to go after the director's position," he said. "I had seen death and destruction since my first fire, but knowing that 178 people had been needlessly killed and seeing all those families behind the barricades with their candles lit put things into perspective for me."

Crawford said his status as head of Tennessee Task Force One won't affect his ability to serve as director. He said he's been training other group members to do his task force job if a disaster occurs.

As the alarm sounded at Station 11 and firefighters got into their gear, Crawford described what he hopes the effect of his nomination will be on Memphis citizens.

"When they lay their heads on their pillows at night they'll know that, if something happens, a group of well-trained rescuers will come, so they can rest."

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Staff reporter Blake Fontenay contributed to this story.