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Where fair pay equals safer cities

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For those who care about public safety, we draw your attention to Escondido, where 190 people have applied for 24 entry-level positions as emergency medical technicians in the fire department.

The astonishing recruiting success – 74 of the applicants were well-qualified – surprised some officials. And it blew a giant hole in the argument trotted out by city managers and public employee unions for years that cities must constantly increase pay and benefits to “remain competitive.”

The theory was that essential services would suffer if governments didn’t pay workers the same or more than other cities, let alone the private sector. The resulting cost spiral has instead crippled services for many.

We should note here that the starting pay for these EMT jobs in Escondido is \$12.05 per hour, although health, pensions and other benefits will push total compensation to about \$47,000 a year.

That’s a fraction of the \$124,000 the city pays the typical firefighter who is cross-trained as a paramedic, a job category that in recent years came to dominate local fire departments as unions convinced city councils that cross-trained firefighters at six-figure compensation rates would somehow help public safety.

Escondido Mayor Sam Abed, a successful businessman, understands that you can’t really know what it costs to get good workers until you place some help-wanted advertisements and see what happens.

“All the claims critics have made that we’re jeopardizing public safety were completely false,” Abed said this week. “We’re saving \$1.4 million a year and we still have more quality applicants than we can hire.”

Indeed, Escondido is vastly improving public safety. Like most cities, medical problems account for 80 percent of 911 calls.

Yet the city couldn’t afford enough ambulances, or trained crews for them. It was routinely requesting help from neighboring cities.

By using EMTs instead of paramedic/firefighters, Escondido will improve from four to six ambulances during daytime hours, and from three to four overnight.

So far, Escondido is a pioneer in leveraging fiscal prudence to increase public safety. It had far more company in the years it was digging itself into its mess.

Given the choice amid tight budgets between pay hikes and maintaining or improving essential services, elected officials across the nation have overwhelmingly chosen higher pay.

A recent study by the Heritage Foundation found that the average federal employee earns 85 percent more than the average private-sector worker. State and local government workers make 45 percent more

than the private-sector employees they serve, a Cato Institute analysis found. Yet another study found public workers reported higher levels of well-being.

Clearly, the American people want their public servants well-compensated and well-treated. Yet leaders have well overshoot the public's ability to pay for the resulting deficits and have degraded essential services.

Escondido has found the way out of this quandary.