“Different” Means “Not Equal”

Mr. Mayor:

On January 17, 2019 you were asked by a member of the media why Emergency Medical Service workers in the City of New York are so severely underpaid compared to other uniformed service members. You stated, “I think the work is different. We are trying to make sure people are treated fairly and paid fairly, but I do think the work is different.” This answer has sparked outrage from emergency service workers here in New York City and across the country.

“Separate but equal” arguments have been used in this country for decades to justify discrimination and excuse the inexcusable. We understand that much of this bias may be implicit and unintentional. But there are bright lines that keep us honest, and language like “it’s different” is one of them.

While we recognize that each agency is different, New York City’s emergency services are comprised of an intricate web of highly trained first responders whose duties often overlap, and who provide equally crucial and inter-related life-saving care to New Yorkers.

While unfortunately we are viewed by you and your administration as “different,” we answer the call just like every other emergency service member.

Mr. Mayor, how do you explain the hypocrisy of promoting yourself as a beacon for equality while using such coded language to justify pay inequity? It does not go unnoticed that EMS is the most diverse group, comprising the greatest percentage of women and people of color in our uniformed services.

Your comment also exposed a fundamental ignorance of the work of EMS when responding each year to 1.5 million calls. Let us make clear:

We respond daily to every emergency that occurs in New York City, standing shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in the NYPD and the fire side of the FDNY. We do not know what we are walking into or what may be on the other side of the door, but that never slows us down. We were on the frontlines of the response on 9/11, during Superstorm Sandy, and at every catastrophe the City has encountered. We often respond to medical emergencies that escalate into violence and jeopardize our safety. Every three years, we are required to renew our certifications just to maintain our jobs, and we routinely have new responsibilities added to our job titles as technology evolves.

With the recent polarized political climate in our country, and threats against the City, EMS has become part of the City’s Counterterrorism Task Force. We are given military grade ballistic gear (aside from our personal issued ballistic gear) and must respond with the NYPD to active shooter scenarios, unarmed and vulnerable to harm.

To repeat, we respond to every emergency in New York City: medical emergencies, rescue jobs, confined space rescue, train derailments, fires, car accidents, emotionally disturbed patients, and hazmat jobs, to name a few.

While we train vigorously to respond effectively to these emergencies, we are still left without pay parity compared to other first responders, nor are we given equivalent resources or equipment. When it serves the City to treat us as uniformed service, our schedules are ordered, and overtime mandated. When it serves the City to claim we are not uniformed service, we are called “civilians” and not given the same pay or entitlement to sick leave as our colleagues.

This is how “it’s different” impacts us. It allows us to be forgotten, devalued, and mistreated as we protect and serve.

echo your sentiment, stating that you “got it right” in your belief that EMS work is “different” shows how deeply entrenched your administration is in these misguided beliefs. It also shows how much work must be done to end discriminatory pay practices in this City.

Mr. Mayor, as a candidate you spoke of a “Tale of Two Cities” which you said you would “take dead aim at.” You promised to right the economic injustices of this City and represent the 99%. But instead you are advancing a false narrative that perpetuates a “Tale of Two Departments” where the predominately white and male fire side is paid fairly, while the predominately non-white and female EMS side is not.

Mr. Mayor, as you weigh your national aspirations under the mantle of progressive values, consider this: there are more than 21,000 EMS agencies across the United States, many of whom have already expressed their anger over your remarks. They deserve your respect, as do the brave women and men who serve here at home, and who depend on you to be a voice for equality.

Please put action to your words and take the courageous steps necessary to evolve on this issue. There is still time to be on the right side of history in the fight for pay equity in New York City.

You can make that difference. Your legacy and our lives depend on it.

Oren Barzilay
President
Local 2507
Uniformed EMTs, Paramedics
& Fire Inspectors

Vincent Variale
President
Local 3621
Uniformed EMS Officers FDNY

Learn more at www.emsworkisdifferent.com. For more information, contact 718-371-0310 or Contact@local2507.com.