How one firefighter made $210K in OT

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One San Diego firefighter was paid $210,500 in overtime alone in 2014, according to newly released figures about local government payrolls.

That's more than the annual salary of the FBI director, at $178,700, and the U.S. Attorney General, at $199,000.

9 California firefighters who topped $200K in overtime

Kyle Kutzke, 34, who’s listed as a firefighter 2 for San Diego, was paid that amount on top of $26,700 in base pay, according to data the city comptroller submitted to the open government group Transparent California and the State Controller’s Office.

Fire officials now say Kutzke’s pay was slightly different — $176,000 in overtime on top of $63,600 in base pay. Either way, the big numbers point up a phenomenon that has been a city management issue — and part of the culture for firefighters — for decades.

"It's a little extra bonus for the guys," a retired firefighter told the Los Angeles Times in 1996, when $100,000 in overtime in a year was considered a lot. "It gets them a new boat on the river and a new truck every year."

The expense has typically been justified by budget managers who say it's cheaper than hiring more firefighters. But San Diego’s city auditor, Eduardo Luna, calculated in 2014 that it’s no longer less expensive to pay overtime, because of certain benefit reductions for firefighters. With dangers like weary firefighters, he argued, balance needs to come to overtime shifts.

City officials promised to implement three of his recommendations by March 2015, and not one has happened. There has been some resistance.
“As someone who’s ridden on a fire engine here in the city of San Diego for nearly 28 years, it often concerns me when I have city auditors dictating how we should be fighting fires and saving lives,” said Alan Arrollado, president of San Diego Fire Fighters Local 145.

Kutzke did not respond to repeated calls, emails and fire station visits from U-T Watchdog.

Arrollado said that Kutzke is a hardworking employee who brings valuable skills to the department. He’s bilingual, has received multiple degrees with high honors, including a master’s in business administration, and is trained as a technical rescue expert and hazardous materials incident responder.

The Watchdog reviewed local government compensation data for 2014 for all kinds of employees, and firefighters stood out when it came to overtime, locally and statewide.

In San Diego County, the top 22 overtime recipients were all San Diego city firefighters. Twenty-one of them made more than six figures for the extra work. No. 23 was Brendan Barahura, a fire captain in Chula Vista, with $97,400 in overtime.

Statewide, firefighters also dominated the top overtime rankings, with several of them making more than Kutzke.

Los Angeles firefighter III Donn Thompson received the most overtime, $286,500 in 2014. Thompson has been a longtime worker of extra hours, featured in that Los Angeles Times story in 1996 and a Los Angeles Daily News story in 2009 about firefighter OT.

“The first thing [people] think of is firefighters sitting around at the station, but they’re not just handing out free money over here,” Thompson said. “I’m working hard.”

Thompson, who has been a firefighter for about 34 years, said working the extra hours consumes the majority of his spare time.
“I’ve never spent that much time at home,” he said. “I basically lived at the fire station.”

In the 2014 overtime data, Thompson is followed by Corona fire captain Roger Williams with $232,900 and L.A. Fire Captain I Charles Ferrari with nearly $230,000.

Kutzke ranks seventh on the state’s overtime list and is the only San Diego employee at the top until Edward Cormode, a firefighter III at No. 36, who made $163,400 on top of his base salary.

San Diego Fire-Rescue Department spokesman Lee Swanson said firefighters are typically scheduled to work 2,900 hours each year, or about 121, 24-hour shifts. With a department-wide need for overtime because of staffing issues, they averaged some 3,200 hours in 2014 with overtime.

The most recent union contract says employees who volunteer for overtime are paid at a normal rate unless they’ve worked more than 212 hours in a 28-day period. After reaching this limit, they receive overtime at 1.5 times their base pay. If there are no volunteers, a shift becomes mandatory and firefighters are paid overtime regardless of hours worked.
Swanson said Kutzke’s pay covered more than 3,870 overtime hours, equivalent to about 161 extra shifts, on top of his normal schedule in 2014. About 98 percent of the work was voluntary. That equates to a work year of 282 days and nights of work (firefighters sleep at the fire station when on duty) and 83 days off. A white-collar worker with two weeks’ vacation typically puts in 250 8-hour work days, with 115 days off.

According to Swanson, there’s no limit to how much overtime San Diego firefighters can accrue.

“While [Kutzke’s overtime] was an extraordinary amount of hours worked, it is every supervisor’s responsibility to assess their employees’ fitness for duty throughout the shift,” Swanson said.

A previous policy, eliminated in July 2008, limited firefighters to working 96 consecutive hours and provided for a 24-hour period of rest before an employee could work again. Swanson said Fire-Rescue management hopes to reinstate the rule during contract negotiations with Local 145.

“Because we’re so shorthanded right now, and have been since the recession, effectively everybody is being paid time and a half for their shifts,” said Arrollado, from the union.

There are about 800 uniformed firefighters on staff in San Diego, covering 47 stations, according to the department’s website. Arrollado said in 2014, Local 145 was “down about 100 bodies at one point.” A 2014 staffing analysis found that in 2013 approximately 80 full-time positions were vacant throughout the year.

The primary factor driving firefighter overtime is "constant staffing," a contract provision that requires fire stations to be staffed around the clock for fires, medical calls or other emergencies. This means firefighters must work overtime to fill vacant positions or when co-workers are sick, injured and on vacation.

In 2014, overtime costs for San Diego’s fire department reached $34.9 million, which comes to about $4,000 every hour of every day, according to state controller data. Over the past three years, overtime has accounted for between 25 and 31 percent of the department’s budget.
Arrollado said he understands how overtime reports are a source of frustration, but it’s hard for the public to grasp how different a firefighter’s workday is compared to a normal 9-to-5 job.

“A firefighter’s workday is three times as long as a normal person’s workday,” he said. “When we start throwing out numbers about the volume of hours that somebody works, we start equating those to other jobs, and you can’t draw that equivalency.”

A May 2008 independent budget analysis in San Diego found that heavy reliance on overtime was saving the city millions of dollars.

In 2013, District 7 City Councilman Scott Sherman requested an audit of the department, saying it had regularly gone over its “substantial” annual overtime budget.

“The use of such a large amount of overtime raises concerns about fatigue, morale and other issues,” Sherman said in his official request to City Auditor Eduardo Luna. “In addition, there has been abuse of overtime, vacation hours, and sick leave at other agencies throughout the country.”

Luna’s August 2014 report found that it’s no longer cheaper for the department to pay overtime instead of hiring new employees because of pension cutbacks approved by voters in 2012. Other than costs for training during an employee’s first year, the report said, the two approaches are now about the same price.

The report also found that 41 percent of San Diego fire employees had accrued more leave time than the limit outlined in labor agreements.

Luna recommended that San Diego cap the annual leave, integrate a more reliable timekeeping system and analyze the impact of pension changes to determine how many new employees
the department can hire while still being cost-efficient.

Fire-Rescue officials agreed to adopt all of the recommendations by no later than March 2015, but a follow-up report this past June found that none of the recommendations had been implemented.

Former Fire Chief Javier Mainar told City Council members in September 2014 that many of the recommendations were redundant or unrealistic. For example, Mainar said the department already reviews its staff and conducts an analysis of efficiency each month.

The department is working to train and hire more staff but progress is slow, Arrollado said. It takes about two years for firefighters to successfully complete the necessary training and the city is losing many of its top graduates to surrounding cities that offer more competitive salaries and benefits.

“We’re all competing for the same firefighters,” Arrollado said. “If you’re a highly qualified and well skilled candidate, you can basically pick which fire department you want to work for and, unfortunately, many of them are not picking the San Diego Fire Department.”