
Perceived pay inequity

INCIDENT

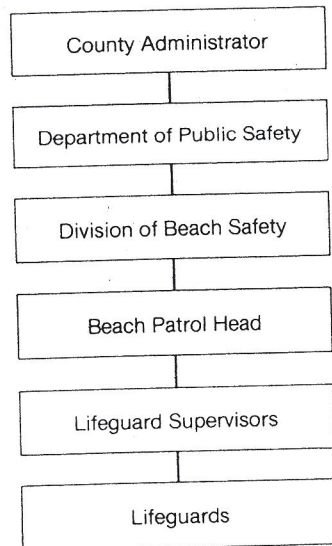
The Atlantic County Division of Beach Safety employs 100 trained lifeguards during the summer months on the county's ocean beaches. The lifeguard corps is mainly comprised of young college-age males and females who are strong swimmers and have completed specific courses in swimming, water safety, and lifesaving. Officials in the Division of Beach Safety are proud of the beach patrol, as it was ranked second in the nation on quality of its performance.

Last summer, however, the lifeguards exhibited a lack of motivation and complained about the terms of their employment and working conditions but continued to work effectively. Their discontent centered on the issue of inadequate wages. Compared with other ocean lifeguards, they were receiving one to three dollars less per hour. Compared with other Atlantic County employees, the lifeguards were the lowest workers on the pay scale. Entry-level secretaries, for example, received higher pay than the lifeguards.

To reasonably resolve their pay problem, the lifeguards met with their immediate supervisors and were told, "We can do nothing about your low pay. The Division of Beach Safety sets your wage rates, not us. We have many applicants for lifeguard jobs, and jobs are scarce in the summer. You are lucky to have your jobs; don't rock the boat. If you still want to try and do something about your pay, see the head of the Division of Beach Safety or the head of the Department of Public Safety."

After appropriate appointments had been arranged, the head officials of beach safety and public safety, accompanied by staff members, came to a lifeguard meeting at the main lifeguard station. In reply to demands for increased pay, Sally Wingate, head of the Department of Public Safety,

FIGURE 1
County Government Organization



stated, "There's nothing I can do to alter the adopted budget. Remember that volunteer lifeguards originally did your jobs. Being a lifeguard puts you where the action is and it doesn't hurt your tan, either! After all, we do pay minimum wages. You'll have to see the county administrator about any budget changes."

At a meeting the following week, the county administrator, Roy Hamilton, heard about the lifeguards' request for increased pay and responded, "This year's county budget has been completed and approved. Unfortunately, we were constrained by the tax dollars available. Funds were sufficient to support raises for most other employees. Have a good summer."

Events moved swiftly. Feeling frustrated, rebuffed, and unappreciated, even though their daily work involved life-and-death situations, the lifeguards sought legal advice, learned that they could strike without breaking the state law (because they were not unionized), and decided to "go public" with their grievance. The strike was set for Saturday on the Fourth of July weekend, the busiest day of the year. Area newspapers and television and radio stations were informed about the strike.

On the designated strike day, all lifeguards showed up at the main lifeguard station. More than 75 percent of them supported the strike and remained in front of the main station, refusing to go to appropriate guard stations along the beach. People began to fill the beaches and the water.

The probability of accidental injury and drowning increased steadily along the crowded, unguarded ocean shore.

As the danger increased, two lifeguard supervisors contacted Bill King, chairman of Atlantic County's board of commissioners, who sensed both the immediate dangers and the long-run organization implications.

King instructed Hamilton to decide on prompt action for restoring safety to the county's public beaches, and to develop some specific policy and procedure recommendations dealing with relevant underlying issues such as personnel policy and operational policy. Hamilton knew that he must decide and act quickly on the critical beach safety problem. He also knew that afterwards he must develop recommendations for compensation policy and grievance handling procedures, among others, for the next meeting of the county commissioners.