

Reducing Micro-Hassles Has a Big Impact

ideas

42



Waiving a small fee increases FDNY firefighter diversity

Every four years, the New York Fire Department (FDNY) begins a highly competitive recruitment process for new firefighter candidates. Historically, candidates have been disproportionately white males, resulting in a firefighter force with fewer female and underrepresented group members. In the 2017 recruiting season, FDNY set explicit targets for increased firefighter diversity and engaged NYC's Behavioral Design Team (NYC BDT) to design and test ways to increase the number of women and candidates from underrepresented groups. The NYC BDT's project targeted the first step in the recruitment process: filing to take the civil service exam. By waiving a small fee associated with filing, FDNY managed to increase the number of candidates, including Black and female candidates, who filed to take the exam.

Summary

NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio established increasing equity as a core governing principle of his administration. Achieving City government workforce diversity advances equity goals by ensuring that New York City government reflects the demographic composition of the city's residents. To increase diversity among its workforce, FDNY is focusing on improvements to its recruitment strategy. In past recruitment cycles, many candidates who initially express interest in joining FDNY fail to complete the first step toward becoming a firefighter—filing to take the written exam, which requires a \$30 fee. This drop-off is most keenly experienced by female and underrepresented group candidates. This led FDNY and the NYC BDT to consider what about the process might prevent more female and underrepresented candidates from joining the firefighter workforce.

In 2017, to identify potential barriers to signing up for the exam—and eventually becoming a firefighter—the NYC BDT surveyed eligible candidates. We learned that female and underrepresented group candidates are often unsure of the cost to file for the exam, which might make a small fee—when unexpected—feel like a reason to resign motivation. Previous research supports this finding, as small bureaucratic hassles (like paying a \$30 fee) have been shown to significantly discourage members of underrepresented groups from achieving positive outcomes.^{1,2}

To test whether removing this fee would increase the filing rates among candidates, FDNY and the NYC BDT employed a simple fee waiver, offered by email to a random sample of 1,100 candidates who submitted an Expression of Interest form. We compared their test-filing rate to that of a random sample of candidates who were required to pay the business-as-usual fee for the exam.

Highlights

- ▶ Small hassles such as filing fees can prevent female and underrepresented groups from taking the FDNY exam.
- ▶ Creating a fee-waiver for filing helped increase the diversity and number of candidates who took the FDNY exam in 2017.

¹ S. L. Reeves, (2015). *Caught up in red tape: bureaucratic hassles undermine sense of belonging in college among first generation students* (Doctoral dissertation).]

² Eric P. Bettinger et al., (2011). "The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment."

The results showed that firefighter candidates, overall, were more likely to file when offered a fee waiver than when required to pay the small fee by 4.2 percentage points, representing a 37% increase in filing rates among all candidates.³ Perhaps more relevant to FDNY's goals, Black candidates were 6.3 percentage points more likely to file for the exam when offered a fee waiver, an 84% increase in filing rates (an increase from 7.5% to 13.8%).⁴ Similarly, the 4.2 percentage point increase among female candidates represents an 82% increase in filing rates for women (an increase from 5.1% to 9.3%).

At scale, waiving the fee for candidates could increase filing by about 3,300 firefighter candidates, with a proportionately larger impact among female and Black candidates, making significant headway towards FDNY's diversity targets.

This pilot demonstrates the potential impact of waivers of small fees on recruitment processes. An important follow-up question to these results, however, is whether candidates with waived fees actually take the exam at the same rates as those who paid a fee. To encourage test taking among test filers and to continue to support candidates' momentum along the FDNY recruitment pathway, the NYC BDT ran a successful follow-up pilot that leverages text messages, email, and robo-calls to increase testing rates and support candidates who may be eligible to claim additional points. The follow-up study on the outcomes for candidates who received fee waivers is still ongoing as they make their way through the recruiting process.

³ This result is statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$).

⁴ This result is statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$).

FDNY Fee Waiver Offer Email**New York's Bravest**

IFNAMEI, take the next step in becoming a Firefighter:

**File to take the computer-based exam
today – for free.**

The application period **is now open.**

Filing to take the exam usually costs \$30, but **you have been
randomly selected to receive an automatic fee waiver.**

File to take the exam by following these 5 easy steps.

1. Go to the [DCAS website](#).
2. Select the “Firefighter” Exam (Exam No. 7001).
3. Indicate that you are eligible for a **Non-CIN fee waiver**. Do not pay!

***IMPORTANT:** You have been randomly chosen to receive an automatic fee waiver, so you do **NOT** need to provide any verification information after filing.**

4. Login using your OASys account.
5. Submit your application to file for the exam.

Don't lose the opportunity to file for free! Filing ends on April 25.

File Now!