

**July 7, 2004**

**Chicago Panel Details Fire Dept. Errors**

**By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

**Filed at 7:48 p.m. ET**

CHICAGO (AP) -- The commission investigating a fire that killed six people in a high-rise county building accused the Fire Department on Wednesday of a series of blunders that may have cost lives, including the mishandling of 911 calls about victims trapped in a smoky stairwell.

The independent commission determined that the department fought the fire from the wrong stairwell, failed to seize control of a public-address system and directed fleeing employees to the wrong place, all of which ``contributed to the loss of life and serious injuries."

``It was apparent to us that certain individuals who were fighting that fire clearly did not know what they were doing," said commission member Sheila M. Murphy.

In addition to the six people who died from smoke inhalation, several people were injured in the Oct. 17 fire at the 35-story Cook County Administration Building in downtown Chicago. Arson has been suspected, but no official cause has been determined.

Fire Commissioner Cortez Trotter, who was director of Chicago's Office of Emergency Management and Communications at the time of the blaze, said he created a team to help him analyze the report and implement some of its recommendations.

``What you'll see now is more resources being deployed and directed toward the search-and-rescue operation immediately," Trotter said.

The 94-page report recommended requiring sprinklers in pre-1975 high-rises as well as requiring exit stairwells to have doors that either remain unlocked or automatically unlock when there is a fire.

The commission said the deaths and serious injuries ``would not have occurred" if the high-rise had such protections.

The commission found that in violation of its own policies, the department ``did not set up an initial search-and-rescue team upon arrival" and focused on extinguishing the blaze rather than rescuing people. It also was critical of the department's handling of 911 calls.

``It seemed like the 911 calls came in, they went into a black hole," said commission chairman Abner Mikva. ``They just never got followed up."

The report includes 20 recommendations for the fire department, including better coordination among emergency officials, a physical-fitness training program, and top-to-bottom stairway searches during high-rise fires.

Trotter said the department has already made some of the changes suggested in the report, including making it policy to take over control of a building's public-address system once firefighters arrive.

The commission also recommended an overhaul of the department's promotion policies, calling for "competitive examinations" for most jobs.

That recommendation promises to get special attention in a department that has long been struggling with its hiring and promotion policies. For years, minorities and whites have attacked those policies, claiming they have been discriminated against.

The commission also criticized the building's security and management companies, citing a lack of training and a failure by security guards to unlock the stairwell doors.

The commission, made up of retired judges, held months of hearings, interviewing experts, engineers and fire officials.