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Chicago firefighters to get safer gear

\$10 million contract will update outfits

By **Mitch Dudek**

Tribune staff reporter
Published July 21, 2006

About 5,000 Chicago firefighters are being fitted for new protective gear that has already been adopted by all other major cities and will replace equipment that has not changed much in decades.

The new outfits, known as "bunker gear," will cover the entire body and consist of more flexible boots, overall-style pants and a coat, Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford said.

"It's a huge step forward" that is as important as the adoption of the self-contained breathing apparatus in the 1980s, 1st District Chief Jose Santiago said.

Firefighters currently wear a three-quarters-length coat that overlaps rubber boots extending to the hip. The uniform, which has been used for decades in Chicago, leaves the crotch and thighs exposed if the coat flares up or opens during a fire, Langford said.

One drawback with the new gear, however, is that because it covers the body, it will be a hotter outfit to wear as a firefighter battles a blaze, Langford said. As a result, firefighters battling a big blaze will need to be relieved with replacements more frequently, causing the Fire Department to increase staffing at major fires, he said.

But many firefighters believe the trade-off is worthwhile, Santiago said.

"The firefighters have seen the new gear, and they are getting excited," he said.

The old rubber boots could melt in high temperatures and tended to fill up

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with water and debris, Santiago said. "I don't know how many times I've cut myself with stuff that's fallen in my boots."

The city signed a \$10 million contract with Lion Apparel Inc. of Dayton, Ohio, several weeks ago to provide the suits, as well as clean, inspect and maintain them, Langford said.

Firefighters are expected to get their new gear by the fall. Chicago is the last major city in the United States to adopt the new protective gear, Langford said.

Some firefighters in Chicago already use the suits. Firefighters stationed at Midway and O'Hare International Airports are mandated to wear them by the Federal Aviation Administration, Langford said.

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- Nation/world news
- Opinion
- Columnists
- Special reports
- Photos
- Video
- Multimedia
- Obituaries
- Health
- Education
- Weather
- Traffic

Business

- Your money
- Stocks
- The Digital Page
- What's ahead
- Business tech
- Technology
- Wireless/
- Networking
- Columnists

Sports

- Bears
- Bulls
- Blackhawks
- Cubs
- White Sox
- Colleges
- High school
- Golf
- Soccer
- Columnists

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- Flight tracker
- Travel deals
- Fall colors
- Midwest getaways
- Follow the sun
- Skiing 2005-06
- Cruising 2005-06
- National Parks
- Resourceful traveler
- 10 for the road
- GeoQuiz

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- Arts
- Critics' reviews
- Dining
- Food
- Horoscope
- Leisure
- Lottery
- Movies
- Music
- Theater
- Shopping
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