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Firefighting Wardrobe in Hamburg

Hamburg's Youth Fire Brigade received 860 new all-weather coats, and the young people find them great. But why is the city of Hamburg contracting a private firm to manage the firefighting-wardrobe? Because Hamburg is no longer operating its own clothing depot.

Ramona Burmester and Thomas Kern of Hamburg-Moorfleet were the first to receive the outdoor coats. After trying the coat on, Thomas kern said: "They're much better than the orange-colored trash bags we wore before; they didn't correspond to a modern youth fire brigade at all."

In Marcel Steinhäuser's view: "The old coats didn't provide protection against the cold; we're much better outfitted now."

The coats, supplied by the company GSG Geilenkothen, are 70 percent polyester, 30 percent cotton. They are blue (RAL 5000), feature reflective stripes, are emblazoned with an emblem on the back as well as a fluorescent shoulder yoke for good visibility during the day. According to Steinhäuser: "They're waterproof, windproof, rugged, and have a removable vest. That gives us a lot more flexibility when training outdoors, making us less dependant on the weather." The outfit, which is available throughout Germany, is supplied in seven sizes.

Hamburg's senator Udo Nagel examined the all-weather coat himself, and presented the first ones to Burmester and Kern. The Hanseatic City of Hamburg paid approximately 120 Euros a piece. "This investment was necessary and important," said Senator Nagel, "in order to express our appreciation for the youths' commitment."

The new coats were to have been presented to the members of the 47 youth fire brigades in Hamburg in the winter of 2004. Due to a legal action concerning the awarding procedure of the fire department's privatized clothing depot, however, the coats could not be ordered on time. The former operator of the clothing depot was not satisfied with the conditions of the new award, but later withdrew his objections. In the opinion of some fire department members, he had simply overrated his services as manager of the clothing depot.

Firm for the fire department

Political decisions several years ago led to the situation that the fire dept had to cut back 5 percent on their personnel costs. The brigades themselves were to remain untouched by this measure. Among other things, therefore, this led to the privatization of the clothing depot in the year 2000. The upshot is that the personnel costs have dropped by 400,000 Euros annually.

In the new tendering award in 2004, the firm "**Lion Apparel**" received an eight-year contract with a renewal option of four years. The firm is based in the USA and operates world-wide. There are three members of the company in Hamburg looking after the firefighters' apparel. There are also seven textile engineers in product development and a central call-center.

Organizing all of the issue of apparel will soon be carried out from the clothing depot. Although the "Lion Shop" - that's the name of the clothing depot - actually comes closer to resembling a fashion shop. 120 different types of apparel in various sizes are displayed and stored here. And the value of the merchandise comes to about one million Euros.

2,200 professional firefighters, 3,800 volunteer personnel as well as the youth fire brigade members and the firefighter musical bands all have themselves outfitted with the appropriate apparel at the "Lion Shop". Rounding out the product line are a variety of goods and accessories covering everything conceivable related to firefighting.

"The warehouse has to stock all clothing items in every size, for personnel ranging from the small and stout to those who are tall and slim," says Werner Heinzmeier of the Hamburg fire department's purchasing section. This is a service that has price repercussions. "It's no secret, for example, when we purchase shirts that they are going to be about 30% more than before," says Heinzmeier. A blue shirt with an emblem costs 16 Euros. Formerly, the fire department was able to buy the shirts at wholesale prices; today the department has to obtain their merchandise from the clothing depot contractor. "If the concept didn't work out for us, we wouldn't be using it", says Peter Braun, a fire department spokesperson.

But the Hamburg fire brigades are looking towards cooperative ventures with brigades from outlying areas beyond the city. Thus the supplier's costs for logistics, financing, personnel, operations and administration could be divided among a number of units. Countering this scenario, however, is the fact that the individual states are still committed to varying styles for many clothing items.

"The Total Care general contractor system has proven itself," reports Christian Eineder, head of purchasing for Lion Apparel. "We bring along the experience of Bavaria with us, where we used a similar concept to supply apparel to the 32,000 police officers of the state. The fire department of Wuppertal as well as the Federal Army also rely on Lion Apparel. The firm also supplies London's fire department." Eineder says: "The British are ahead as far as clothing is concerned. They are already leasing protective apparel." He anticipates that due to the stretched financial situation of German municipalities, Germany will soon contemplate similar measures. If that comes about he can also envisage financing models via investor funds.

Eineder is convinced that "we can expect a lot of things to begin happening in this respect in Germany in the next few years, even if bringing about uniformity of firefighting apparel in Germany is a long way down the road."

Goods worth around 1 million Euros are stored at the clothing depot's shop and an additional warehousing depot at Hamburg's central fire station. The operation resembles a fashion shop.

Text: Timo Jann