

NEW YORK NEWS POLITICS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT OPINION LIVING

FIREMAN IN COKE RAP Driver in Bx. crash drugged up, FDNY says

BY LISA FLEISHER , DON SINGLETON / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS / Sunday, February 29, 2004, 12:00 AM A A A

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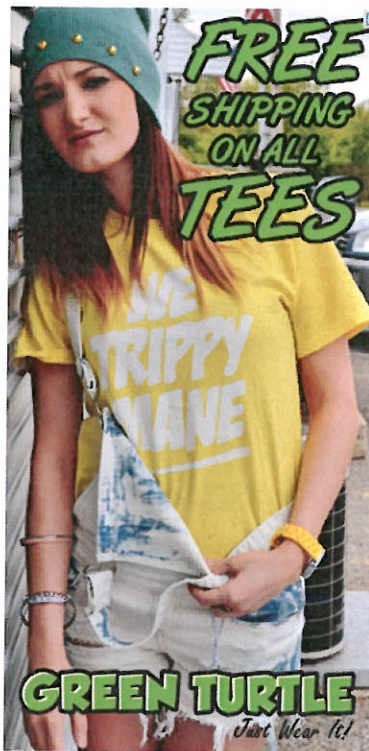
One of the firefighters behind the wheel in the two-engine pileup in the Bronx last weekend was high on cocaine, Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta revealed yesterday. Firefighter Thomas Lennon, who has been with Engine 83 for seven years, was driving the fire truck toward a South Bronx blaze Feb. 20 when the rig plowed into another fire truck and set off a multicar pileup that injured 13 people and wrecked numerous vehicles. Tests disclosed that Lennon, 41, had enough coke in his system to be considered under the influence, Scoppetta said. "I was truly shocked - appalled - to learn that one of the drivers tested positive for a controlled substance, cocaine," Scoppetta said. The commissioner said he would begin discussions with the fire union to begin random drug testing of firefighters. "Drug use is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated," Scoppetta said. "This is a safety issue - for the public, and our own members.

"Lennon may also be evading a residency requirement for firefighters, the Daily News has learned. The Fire Department said Lennon lives in the Bronx. But a search of telephone records linked that address to a Paramus, N.

J., address and number. A woman who answered the Paramus phone said the home was the residence of New York City Firefighter Thomas Lennon, but she quickly hung up when she learned the caller was a reporter. Under state and city laws, firefighters must live in the five boroughs, Long Island or one of four upstate counties. The two-truck collision was the latest embarrassment for a department already red-faced over a booze-fueled New Year's Eve brawl at a Staten Island firehouse and the discovery of a liquor stash at a Harlem firehouse. Lennon, whose head was injured in the crash, remains on paid medical leave, the commissioner said. When he is off leave, Lennon will be suspended for 30 days without pay, then face administrative charges and possible termination, Scoppetta said. Steve Cassidy, president of the Uniformed Firefighters Association, said the union welcomes "the invitation to develop a fair system [of drug testing] that protects the rights of our members.

"Currently, testing of firefighters is done only when there is suspicion of drug use. Police officers, correction officers and Sanitation Department workers are all randomly tested, Scoppetta said. Under current testing procedures, he said, "about a dozen" firefighters have tested positive out of 11,500 department members. "I know there are some who think you can be a firefighter or perform the duty of an EMT or paramedic and use drugs or use alcohol," Scoppetta said. "Well, they're wrong.

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