

# FDNY pool more diverse

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Efforts by city agencies to boost the number of minorities in the Fire Department are working, Mayor Michael Bloomberg said yesterday as he touted a sharp increase in the number of blacks, Latinos and Asians eligible to become firefighters over the next four years.

Of the 21,183 people who passed the test in January, 38 percent were minorities, a 17-percent increase from the last test in 2002. Of the top 4,000 scorers — those who are most likely to be hired — 33 percent are minorities, up from 14 percent in 2002.

The number of women who took and passed the test also increased, by 50 percent, from 512 in 2002 to 770, city officials said.

The numbers were met with guarded optimism from those who have been fighting to change the makeup of a department that is 90 percent white and less diverse than those of other major cities.

"It only shows that we at the council, we were right all along," said City Councilman Miguel Martinez, chairman of the committee that oversees the department. "Now the administration needs to show that they are serious by putting a full-time recruiting unit in the department."

Passing the exam is the first step to becoming a city firefighter. Qualified applicants must pass a grueling physical assessment and graduate from the Fire Academy before becoming members of the department. About 600 new firefighters are selected each year for the process, and the current pool is valid until 2011.

Of the 11,621 firefighters in

the department, 666, or 6 percent, are Hispanic; just 337, or 3 percent, are black, a far cry from the makeup of the city, whose black and Hispanic residents total 50 percent. The department also has just 31 women and about 75 Asians.

The announcement comes as City Council members and civil rights groups have scrutinized the lack of diversity in the department, and on the heels of a federal civil rights suit filed in May that calls past tests unfair.

Bloomberg said the lawsuit had nothing to do with the city's stepped-up recruitment efforts. He said the problem has been due, in large part, to a lack of minority applicants, not test procedures.

"I thought the lawsuit was unnecessary from the beginning," Bloomberg said. "It was that we did not attract people to take the test. That was the fundamental problem."

But members of the Center for Constitutional Rights, along with the Vulcan Society, a group of black city firefighters — both parties to the federal lawsuit — looked at the numbers skeptically.

"The jury is going to be out until all of these people are hired," said John Coombs, president of the Vulcan Society. "The Justice Department lawsuit is the hammer hanging over their heads."

