



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS®

HAROLD A. SCHAITBERGER
General President

VINCENT J. BOLLON
General Secretary-Treasurer

To the Honorable Members of the Connecticut House of Representatives:

As the General President of the International Association of Fire Fighters, representing 287,000 women and men that serve this country as fire fighters and emergency medical personal, I ask you to support HB-5629.

As fire fighters, we work hard each and every day, proudly protecting and serving our citizens. In the daily life of Connecticut fire fighters, my members are on the job to answer the call for help, a call to save lives. That call may be to suppress fire and save lives jeopardized by smoke and flame. That call may be for emergency medical assistance and transport to the hospital. Fire fighters have little idea about the identity of many of the materials they are potentially exposed to or the hazards of such exposures. Nevertheless, fire fighters continue to respond to the scene and work immediately to save lives and reduce property damage without regard to the potential hazards that may exist. A fire emergency has no controls or occupational safety and health standards to reduce the effect of toxic chemicals. It is an uncontrollable environment that is fought by fire fighters using heavy, bulky and often times inadequate personal protective equipment and clothing.

Unfortunately, in the course of their work Connecticut fire fighters are still exposed to toxic smoke that gets more deadly each year, as clothing, furniture, and household goods are increasingly made of plastics and other synthetic materials. They are exposed to a variety of infectious diseases; where in fact, and contrary to some statements, fire fighters are exposed to blood on a frequent basis during their daily work activities. In a US Federal Government Study conducted during the development of the federal OSHA Bloodborne Pathogen Standard it was shown that 98 % of EMT's and 80% of fire fighters are exposed to bloodborne diseases on the job.

Some are also confused on the issue of paying for treatment of a fire fighter injured at work, in this case through an exposure to a toxic material, carcinogen or an infectious disease. Some also state that fire fighters are entitled to worker compensation for injuries and illnesses and routinely their bills are paid and the firefighter is compensated for lost productivity. Well, that is exactly what this legislation will do. It provides for a rebuttable presumption--that is the employer can demonstrate that the exposure did not occur in the line of duty--to compensate a fire fighter if an exposure leads to a disease. Just as a fire fighter would be compensated for injuries that occurred after falling through the roof of a burning structure, a fire fighter that develops cancer or has an infectious disease from a job exposure would be compensated.

The workers' compensation system was designed decades ago to handle injuries easily linked to the workplace, such as a broken leg or a cut hand. As medical science has improved, we've learned that some cancers as well as heart and lung diseases are related to the toxic chemicals in smoke. Not surprisingly, fire fighters are more likely to suffer from these occupational diseases.

An occupational disease takes years to develop. It's the result of a career of responding to fires and chemical spills; it's the result of breathing toxic smoke and fumes on the job, it is the response to continuous medical runs or extricating wounded victims at accidents. Because cancer, heart and lung diseases develop over time, it's impossible to say, "This specific fire caused my disease," yet fire fighters continue to get sick. The workers' compensation system needs to be fixed to reflect the reality that fire fighters face each and every day.

Finally, there are those that paint the picture of astronomic costs of this legislation. Based on actual experience in the dozens of states that have heart, lung and/or cancer presumptive legislation, the cost per claim is substantially less than the unsubstantiated figures asserted by others. One reason for this, unlike benefits for other occupations, is the higher mortality rate and significantly shorter life expectancy associated with public safety occupations. My members are dying too quickly from cancer and other occupational diseases, unfortunately producing a significant pension annuity saving for states and municipalities.

Fire fighters face the possibility of death or injury every time they respond to an alarm where they provide emergency assistance to the citizens of Connecticut. While risk may be part of our profession, fire fighter deaths and injuries should not be accepted as part of the job. We believe it is time for you to enact legislation to clearly indicate that cancer, heart disease and infectious disease is occupationally related to fire fighting.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Harold A. Schaitberger
General President

cc: Peter Carozza, President, Uniformed Professional Fire Fighters
Association of Connecticut