
From: Rich Etheridge <Rich.Etheridge@juneau.org>
Sent: Wednesday, April 27, 2022 10:13 AM
To: Rep. Neal Foster; Rep. Kelly Merrick; Rep. Daniel Ortiz; Rep. Adam Wool
Subject: SB131 Support

Dear honorable Co-Chair Persons and Vice Chair Persons,

The Alaska Fire Chiefs Association strongly support SB131 to provide additional cancer protections to Alaska's firefighters both Volunteer and Career alike. It appears that the concern being expressed is about potential costs to municipalities. A few brief points We would like to make are:

1. Workers comp rates are set by 40% of the total payroll and 60% based on previous claims and performance; **NOT** what could potentially be covered.
2. Cancer also impacts volunteer firefighters. Many of them do not have private insurance to take care of them, many also do not have the resources to appeal to workers comp for coverage on what could very well be caused from their community service.
3. Without Presumptive Health; If a firefighter contracts cancer from the work place, in addition to fighting for their life, they have to fight the massive system and prove which exposure to smoke or foam or even asbestos caused that specific cancer. At the end of the day, workers comp may still have to cover it if they can prove their case.
4. Firefighters are exposed to carcinogens on a regular basis, many we don't know even about yet. It has only been the last few years we have known about the PFAS in firefighting foam causing cancer.
5. Fire Departments are going to great lengths to reduce risk and exposure through decontamination, education, and equipment. However they are still have an exposure every time they put out our fires. They don't hesitate to step up and take these risks, because that is what we as a community ask of them.

SB131 is the right thing to do. Our communities tote standing by and supporting for our first responders. Passing SB131 is an opportunity to show our volunteer and paid responders that they and what they do matter and if you get sick from the job, we are not going to burry you in red tape. The Alaska Fire Chief's Association humbly asks of the Finance Committee to help move this bill to the floor this session and show our true support for our first responders.

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Honorable Members of the House Finance Committee

I apologize that I cannot testify during the committee hearing this afternoon on SB131, amending Alaska's Worker's Compensation laws regarding fire fighter occupational cancer. A combination of my son being in his first middle school track and field finals as well as it being my anniversary is creating some conflicts in my scheduling. I want to make sure that it is understood that I am here as a concerned citizen and a professional firefighter, and **not in an official capacity of the Anchorage Fire Department**, where I have been employed since 2002.

I was one of the main firefighter advocates that spent four years in Juneau from 2002 to 2006 pushing for the adoption of the original legislation. We were extremely careful with the cancers that we originally wanted included in the language as we wanted to make sure that we were capturing diseases that were occurring in fire fighter populations at a statistically higher level than the general public. We recognized that Worker's Compensation premium rates could be affected by the inclusion of this language and wanted to strike a balance between being fiscally responsible while also taking care of our brothers and sisters who are coming down with occupational diseases.

It has been roughly 15 years since the legislation was signed into law and I believe that we succeeded in striking a good balance in protecting our first responders as well as not financially bludgeoning government entities, as was a common concern. I write to you today in support of adding, at the very least, breast cancer to the list of presumed occupational cancers affecting firefighters. You have no doubt heard stories about Chiefs Warren Cummings and Phil Rounds, Alaskans who both battled male breast cancer, as well as different reports of female firefighters contracting breast cancer at younger ages and at statistically higher rates than the general public.

A lot has changed in the 20 years that I have been a firefighter here in Anchorage. Education about cancer prevention is drilled into our new recruits' heads from the minute they start their Academy. Our personal protective equipment has gotten better every year and is utilized more effectively. We don't simply pull off our SCBA masks and bottles and work a fire scene while all the materials are off gassing anymore. Decontamination of both our bodies and our gear is conducted as soon as possible post-incident, and our gear is washed before being returned to service. Cancer prevention is one of our main goals since more research shows how toxic chemicals found in the structure fire environment is to the human body. Still, the fires that we fight are comprised less of organic material like wood and cotton, and are increasingly more synthetic in nature, like plastics and batteries. The number and toxicity of the chemicals we encounter are at an all-time high. When you take into consideration the healthy worker effect, and that most of the female firefighters having exhaustive pre-employment medical examinations showing no signs of cancer, it becomes even more concerning.

Again, I want to reiterate my support for the legislation that is in front of you today. In a perfect world, we would never need to utilize the protections that legislation like this provides for our first responders. Unfortunately, no amount of PPE, strategy and tactics, and knowledge will keep us 100% protected. We are relying on you to help us and our families.

Thank you for your consideration, and I apologize again for not being able to testify during the normal committee meeting. I welcome your phone calls or emails if you have questions.



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