

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 14, 2022

Mr. Christopher Godfrey
Director, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs
Department of Labor
200 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20210

Dear Director Godfrey:

We urge you to expedite the establishment of a special claims unit to handle firefighter compensation claims so that it can be in place before the start of the 2022 fire season. As you noted in your testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor on December 2, 2021, federal firefighters who file claims with your office are facing many challenges, and it is our understanding that firefighters are sometimes unable to obtain compensation for their medical treatment, especially those who assert long-term illnesses attributable to their work.

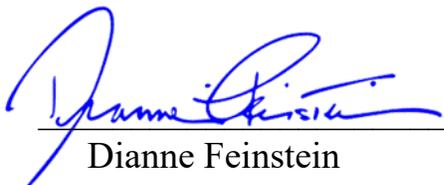
As you know, wildfires in the West are becoming larger, more frequent, and increasingly hazardous. In 2021, the wildland firefighting national preparedness level was raised to its highest level on July 14—the earliest date in a decade and the second earliest date in history—and required the active deployment of more than 80 percent of the nation's wildland firefighting crews. We expect this trend to continue, requiring federal firefighters to be engaged for longer periods of time each year combating increasingly dangerous fires. As a result, firefighters will likely sustain more work-related injuries and will increasingly be exposed to conditions that can lead to long-term illness and injury.

Federal wildland firefighters have recently reported difficulty getting their medical treatment costs for work-related injuries covered by the government within a reasonable timeframe. These firefighters, facing bankruptcy, have been forced to seek assistance from the Wildland Firefighter Foundation or private fundraisers to pay their bills while they await reimbursement. We are similarly concerned that claims from firefighters diagnosed with certain cancers or other long-term illnesses associated with firefighting activities are simply refused. They are told that, because they cannot definitively prove the link between the illness

and their job exposure, the federal government will not cover their medical expenses. This is simply unacceptable—these firefighters put their lives at risk to defend American lives and property, and they deserve our support.

Your commitment to establish a special claims handling unit is an excellent first step to remedying this situation; we urge you to follow through expeditiously and to focus on handling the claims of both federal wildland firefighters and structural firefighters. This new unit should ensure its examiners are aware of the particular risks facing firefighters and provide clear rationales for rejected claims to ensure that claims processing is efficient, accurate, and transparent. Given the urgency of the wildfire situation in the western United States, we request an update as to the status of this special claims handling unit at your earliest convenience. Thank you for considering our request, and we look forward to working with you to support the important work of our federal firefighters.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/s/ Thomas R. Carper

Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

cc: The Honorable Martin J. Walsh
Secretary
Department of Labor