



NFFE and OWCP Director Godfrey Visit Missoula Smokejumper Base to Discuss Workers' Comp Issues

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Last week, the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE) hosted the Department of Labor's Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) Director Christopher Godfrey at the Missoula Smokejumper Base in western Montana. Godfrey held important discussions regarding workers' compensation with the Missoula Smokejumpers and Helitack crews, as well as wildland firefighters at the Ninemile Ranger Station on the Lolo National Forest. Director Godfrey also had the opportunity to tour the Missoula Smokejumper Base, watch parachute training exercises, and take part in a blasting program demonstration during his visit.

Godfrey was appointed as Director of OWCP in 2021. Before he took over, the office had historically been considered by many federal employees and their unions to be difficult to work with. This was especially true for wildland firefighters. In early 2022, Godfrey met with NFFE wildland firefighters in Arizona, who made him aware of the issues facing the workforce in dealing with OWCP. Since then, his office has been focused on helping wildland firefighters who are injured on the job access the healthcare they need. This includes immediate care, as well as medical services for injuries and illnesses that develop over the course of a grueling career fighting wildland fire.

As part of this effort, NFFE and Godfrey established a special claims unit to process wildland firefighter OWCP claims, which consists of expediting claims and staffing the unit with claims examiners who are specifically trained on firefighter medical issues. NFFE also worked with Godfrey and OWCP to expand the medical conditions included in the list of presumptive diseases for federal firefighters, which was codified into law by Congress in 2022.

In discussions with wildland firefighters last week, Godfrey answered questions on how to file workers' compensation claims directly with OWCP using the Employees' Compensation Operations & Management Portal (ECOMP), how to file for schedule awards, how to receive reimbursement for expenses paid out of pocket or with personal insurance, which forms to fill out for different types of injuries, and goals for OWCP moving forward.

Godfrey expressed that one of his most important goals to improving services is adding more healthcare providers to the OWCP system so that employees can choose their preferred doctors and specialists. Godfrey also says that his office is working on setting up another special claims unit to handle mental health claims, which will address traumatic incidents, PTSD, and other conditions of that nature.

NFFE is currently working on creating a guide to OWCP claims and everything federal employees and wildland firefighters need to know to access the healthcare they need. We will be sharing this as soon as it is available, so stay tuned.

"It is really encouraging to have Director Godfrey meet with wildland firefighters to personally discuss workers' compensation with them," said NFFE President Randy Erwin. "He clearly cares deeply about the mission of his office and the employees that he and his staff have a duty to assist. NFFE is proud of our accomplishments thus far in helping wildland firefighters access OWCP, but we understand there is still a lot of work to do. I look forward to working with Director Godfrey so that no federal employee has to worry about their healthcare or finances should they get injured on the job, especially our brave wildland firefighters who risk their lives every day they set out to protect our country from wildland fires."