



Updating procedures to protect female federal firefighters and their families

Filed in Wages and Benefits • By: **Christopher J. Godfrey** • January 6, 2025



Under my leadership, the Department of Labor's Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) has just taken a transformative step forward in addressing the unique challenges faced by female federal firefighters. These brave individuals, especially those serving as Wildland Firefighters, put their lives and health on the line each year to protect communities from dangerous wildfires. Recognizing the gender-specific health risks they face, this week OWCP has introduced groundbreaking changes to the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), setting a new standard for inclusivity and equity in workers' compensation policies.

In 2022 I worked to establish a “high-risk employment” special claims handling unit to streamline the processing of claims for heart, lung and cancer conditions linked to fire protection employment activities. This initiative, documented in FECA Bulletin 22-07, laid the groundwork for subsequent legislative action that same year. The Fairness for Federal Firefighters (FAA) provision, enacted in the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act of 2023, codified OWCP's policies and recognized specific cancers as occupational risks for federal firefighters and others engaged in fire protection activities. However, it did not initially include certain cancers that disproportionately affect women firefighters – highlighting the need for further action. As OWCP's director, I understood this meant that we had more work to do to accomplish our goals of equitable protection o all federal fire protection workers.

To address this gap in coverage, I worked with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and engaged Dr. Steven Moffatt, a leading medical expert on firefighter health, to evaluate evidence that could help u expand coverage. After consultation, Dr. Moffatt has now concluded that female firefighters, more likely than not face heightened risks for breast, uterine and ovarian cancers – conditions not previously covered by the FAA provision – due to the toxic exposures they face in their work. Additionally, he confirmed that basal cell carcinoma presents an increased risk for all firefighters.

As one of my final acts as OWCP's director, I have administered the issuance of a new FECA Bulletin expanding the list of presumptive conditions to include these new cancers. This policy change acknowledges the unique occupational hazards faced by women firefighters and ensures they receive the care and support they deserve. This advancement represents a transformative shift toward equity and recognition of women's contributions and the protections they deserve given the risks they take and the exposures they face.

This policy is transformative for U.S. workers' compensation, but the impact of this change extends beyond our nation's borders. By sharing these findings and policy advancements with international health and safety bodies, including the International Labor Organization, OWCP is influencing global standards for firefighter health and

safety and driving equity coverage for female fighters around the globe. This initiative underscores the importance of addressing gender-specific health risks in high-risk professions and serves as a model for other nations to follow.

I hope my legacy is defined by a steadfast commitment to equity, innovation and the well-being of federal workers. This new policy exemplifies OWCP's mission to protect injured workers and their families while ensuring a fair and just system for all. As OWCP continues to uphold these principles, the advancements for female firefighters stand as a testament to the power of thoughtful leadership and the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by those who serve our nation selflessly.

Christopher J. Godfrey is the director of the Office of Worker Compensation Programs.

Tags: workers' comp, Workers' Compensation, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP)

SHARE THIS:

5 things to know about unemployment insurance progress in 2024

Year in review: Five major IT innovations in 2024

RELATED POSTS

MORE FROM AUTHOR



Did You Know? Workers' Comp Covers Mental Health



How Crystal Eastman Fought for Pioneering Worker Protections

Submit Feedback

Scroll to top ↑

Stay Connected! Sign up to receive Department of Labor updates.

Email Address

SUBSCRIBE