

Oregon MLAC Testimony Re: Firefighter Cancer

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Mike Caven

My name is Mike Caven. I have served as a professional firefighter in Oregon for twenty-four years and today I lead one of the state's largest fire departments.

Last year, I joined a club that no firefighter ever wants to join. I was diagnosed with cancer.

Before becoming a fire chief, I served as union president representing firefighters throughout our county. During that time, I helped several members navigate workers compensation after they were diagnosed with presumptive cancers. Those claims generally worked the way they were intended. Firefighters got treatment, their families had financial security, and they could focus on surviving cancer instead of fighting the system.

Then it became my turn.

I was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer called Essential Thrombocythemia.

Its biology is closely related to leukemia. It begins in the same bone marrow stem cells and involves many of the same disease pathways. But because it doesn't happen to have the word "leukemia" in its name, Oregon law treats it completely differently.

I knew from day one that my cancer would not be presumed work related.

That meant I had to prove that twenty-four years of firefighting was the major contributing cause of my cancer.

My treating hematologist, who is a respected expert and researcher in blood cancers, concluded that firefighting was the major contributing cause of my disease.

But I knew that wasn't going to be enough.

So while I was learning to live with cancer and how to pay for treatment, I spent my time becoming an amateur cancer researcher.

I compiled seventeen pages of scientific literature documenting the carcinogens firefighters are exposed to, how those chemicals penetrate our protective equipment, damage DNA, and lead to blood cancers. I even researched military burn pit studies because those exposures have already been linked to the very disease I have.

When I met with the independent medical examiner, I brought all of that research with me.

He told me he wasn't allowed to accept it.

That moment said everything.

I was told to prove my case, but the system wasn't required to consider the evidence I gathered when deciding whether to deny it.

My opportunity to prove causation doesn't happen in front of a medical expert.

It happens nearly a year later, in front of a judge.

I am also not alone in my own organization; there are three of us with biologically related blood cancers. All three of us served as live fire training officers in a three-year window, with two of us side by side in the fire environment for the equivalent of days of high heat toxic exposures. I was shocked to learn that this biologically similar cancer cluster does not legally weigh on my requirement to prove individual causation.

As I researched my diagnosis, I reached out to firefighters around the country with the same disease.

Most of them couldn't tell me how to fight their workers compensation case because they never had to.

They lived in states where their cancers were already presumed to be occupational.

California made that decision nearly thirty years ago because its legislature recognized something that still holds true today. That decision was decades before the International Agency for Research on Cancer deemed firefighting a group 1 (highest) cancer risk. Rare occupational cancers are incredibly difficult to study. Small numbers make large epidemiological studies nearly impossible. The absence of conclusive scientific evidence does not mean the absence of causation.

I hope Oregon can join the growing number of states, including but not limited to California, Alabama, Kansas, Louisiana, Ohio, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, have moved beyond limited cancer lists and now provide presumptive coverage for all or virtually all firefighter cancers

I'm not here to tell you the system is rigged.

But I will tell you that it stacks the deck against firefighters.

Right now, Oregon's law creates winners and losers based on the name of the cancer instead of the exposures that caused it. Two firefighters can spend decades standing beside each other at the same fires, breathing the same smoke and absorbing the same

carcinogens, yet one receives benefits while the other does not simply because one diagnosis appears in statute and the other does not.

We can continue adding cancers one at a time as science catches up and legislatures meet every few years.

Or we can recognize what science already tells us.

Firefighting is a known carcinogenic occupation.

Expanding the presumption to all cancers does not prevent employers from challenging a claim.

It simply shifts the burden of proof away from the firefighter who is battling cancer and onto the system that has the resources to investigate it.

I would certainly appreciate having my own case treated as presumptive. It would give my family peace of mind about the future.

But I am here today for something bigger than my own case.

I don't want the next firefighter diagnosed with a rare occupational cancer to have to fight the disease and fight the system at the same time.

Thank you.