

Public Safety Memorial Fund Board

Minutes (Draft)

October 23, 2025

The Public Safety Memorial Fund Board (PSMFB) held a regular meeting on October 23, 2025, at the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training located at 4190 Aumsville Hwy SE Salem, Oregon. The meeting was called to order at approximately 10:04 a.m.

Committee Members:

Jennifer Cameron, Chair, Law Enforcement Representative
Chris Heppel, Vice-Chair, Fire Service Representative
Mark Daniel, Law Enforcement Representative
Scotty Nowning, Law Enforcement Representative
Michael Reese, Corrections Representative
Mo Young, Public Member from Board

Committee Members Absent:

DPSST Staff:

Marie Atwood, Professional Standards Division Director
Jennifer Howald, Administrative Rules Coordinator
Shelby Alexander, Executive Assistant to the Director
Juan Lopez, Executive Assistant to Marie Atwood

Guests

1. Introductions

- *Chair Cameron began the meeting by inviting everyone in attendance to state their name and position for the record.*

2. *Approve July 24, 2025, Meeting Minutes

- *Member Daniel motioned to approve the July 24, 2025, meeting minutes. Member Reese seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote.*

3. Budget Update

Presented by Marie Atwood

Division Director Atwood noted that budgetary information is limited at the moment due to the start of a new biennium. For the 2025-27 biennium, revenue is at \$380,533 and expenditure limitation is \$310,444. Additional limitations may be requested if needed. In the month of July there were no additional benefits, while in August \$2,574 were distributed by the PSMFB.

**4. *Sergeant Brian Gaunt, DPSST #37820; Beaverton Police Department;
Supplemental Application for Discretionary PSMF Benefits**

Presented by Marie Atwood

On October 24, 2021, Sergeant Brian Gaunt with Beaverton Police Department passed away after spending nearly an entire month in the hospital due to COVID-19 complications.

On January 27, 2022, the Public Safety Memorial Fund Board (PSMFB) considered the initial application for PSMFB benefits submitted by Beaverton Police Department and Holly Gaunt. (spouse of Brian Gaunt). Ultimately the PSMFB determined that Sergeant Gaunt's death was a qualifying death as defined by ORS 243.954. As a result, Holly Gaunt was awarded the lump sum benefit of \$25,000.

On February 4, 2022, Holly Gaunt submitted an initial supplemental application for benefits, requesting further reimbursement for mortgage, medical and dental benefits for herself and three children. The PSMFB subsequently awarded Holly Gaunt a total amount of \$31,964.80.

Since then, Holly Gaunt has continuously sought medical and dental benefits for herself and her three children.

On September 15, 2025, Holly Gaunt submitted the supplemental application for benefits requesting further reimbursement for medical and dental benefits for herself and one of her children, the only currently enrolled in university, for the months of October 2025 through April 2026 (6 months). The total amount being requested is as follows:

Cost of additional medical and dental benefit reimbursement for Holly and one of her children
Grace (Age 18)

\$1,304.24 (medical premium cost per month)

\$148.52 (dental premium cost per month)

x 6 months

Total= \$8,716.56

Requested Reimbursement: \$8,716.56

- *Chair Cameron asked for a motion to approve the supplemental award benefits to Holly Gaunt, as requested, for satisfying the mandated Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS), requirements.*
- *Member Nowning motioned to approve award benefits for Holly Gaunt, as requested. Member Reese seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote.*
- *Member Daniel motioned to approve the full award amount of \$8,716.56 to Holly Gaunt, as requested. Member Reese seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote*

**5. *Battalion Chief Michael Merlino, DPSST #08324; Sutherlin Fire Department;
Initial Application for Discretionary PSMF Benefits**

Presented by Marie Atwood

In January 2024, Battalion Chief Michael R. Merlino was diagnosed with anaplastic thyroid carcinoma after serving as a firefighter and fire paramedic for more than 30 years. An occupational disease claim was filed for the onset of these symptoms while Merlino was still employed at Douglas County Fire District No. 2.

Battalion Chief Merlino filed an occupational disease claim with the City of Sutherlin and its insurer, SAIF Corporation, which was initially denied on March 26, 2024, by the employing agency alleging that thyroid cancer is not a cancer presumed under ORS 656.802(5)(a)(A). On May 31, 2024, a complete denial of occupational disease benefits was issued, which was subsequently appealed by Merlino (claimant) and his spouse (beneficiary).

On September 10, 2024, the Merlino family updated their claim with additional conditions (cancer in the lungs and mouth as his thyroid cancer metastasized) for consideration as an occupational disease under ORS 656.267. Ultimately, the Merlino family and the employer agreed to the terms of a settlement per ORS 656.289(4), on October 21, 2025.

On August 9, 2025, Battalion Chief Michael Merlino lost his battle with cancer and passed away in his home in Roseburg, Oregon. Until death, Mr. Merlino was considered an active employee with the Sutherlin Fire Department. The official “cause of death” reported on Merlino’s Certificate of Death lists, “metastatic anaplastic thyroid cancer with metastasis in the brain, lymph nodes.”

On August 12, 2025, DPSST staff were notified of the death of Michael Merlino and pursued further contact with the current employer and surviving family.

On September 8, 2025, DPSST received Merlino’s Initial Application for Benefits. On September 22, 2025, DPSST received the Notice of Death or Permanent Total Disability/Death.

- *Director Atwood also noted a list of comparable cases to determine whether the condition outlined in the PSMFB materials presumptively qualifies under the relevant statutes.*
- *Chair Cameron asked for a motion to approve that Battalion Chief Merlino met the statutory definition of a public safety officer. In deliberating, member Daniel stated that the circumstances presented, contrasted with the other comparable firefighter cases in question, one of whom he is familiar with, is consistent with the Board’s action moving forward.*
- *Member Nowning also acknowledged the need for elaboration on a statutory determination for future reference.*
- *Vice-Chair Heppel underlined that much of the medical information presented to the Board is based around a SAIF claim and a presumptive cancer component, which was codified in law since 2009-10, when the Oregon Fire Service established presumptive cancer laws. As a result, thyroid cancer is not one of the 12 conditions outlined in statute, leading to confusion around this case being an occupation claim for reimbursement from SAIF or workmen’s compensation.*
- *Additionally, Vice-Chair Heppel acknowledged that for him, the question of whether this was an occupational exposure per the ORS 243 series, Chief Merlino’s 30 years in the*

fire service would amount to that level of exposure. Thyroid cancer is becoming a larger issue, and in fact, during the NFPA 1482 physicals, personnel engaged in exposure are required to undergo a thyroid ultrasound given its recognizable origin for cancer.

- *Vice-Chair Heppel noted his present experience monitoring his own thyroid complications and its relation to carcinogenic exposure throughout his career. Another component to consider is how this condition metastasizes to the rest of the body, and that it indeed ends up in a location that is an occupational exposure designation, such as the lungs, which is a very specific detail in this case. Vice-Chair Heppel's determination is therefore based on his own experience in the fire service along with a seemingly direct correlation to Chief Merlino's exposure, ingestion, etc., to carcinogens in the thyroid area, to his cancer, and to his subsequent death.*
- *Moreover, Vice-Chair Heppel asked why there is even an exposure component in the statute given that if one reviews the studies where fire personnel are most at risk for exposure, one can observe that it is where humans have the least amount of protection including the throat, hands, cuffs, and groin area. There are plenty of signs that tie to this fact and this also justifies why the fire service has so many on-scene decontamination processes after exposure to a fire, which involves direct and thorough cleaning of these regions.*
- *Chair Cameron mentioned that the statute in question relates to brain, colon, stomach, testicular, prostate, myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, throat and mouth, rectal, breast, leukemia, bladder, genealogical cancer of the uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries, cervix, vagina, and vulva cancers. The case materials discuss the process of metastasizing into these areas, which it did in this case, and the intent is not to limit the diagnosis to these specific categories but to keep it open to the possibility of metastasis into these areas.*
- *Member Reese thanked Vice-Chair Heppel for his insight and acknowledged that the Board is setting a precedent moving forward.*
- *Member Daniel also recounted his 10-year volunteer firefighting experience, and current experience as the Captain of the St. Paul Fire District, who has attended numerous trainings. As a result, the carcinogens within the combustibles that personnel must frequently battle require having to go through procedures as firefighters for no other reason but to clean PPE to prevent any possible ingestion or introduction of said carcinogens. These can live outside of the PPE, even in an apparatus, and can affect anyone many years later. Member Daniel states that the reason he would like this case to move forward is because of his strong belief, based on his training and experience, that in all likelihood, Chief Merlino's cancer, no matter the origin, metastasized throughout his body and killed him because of carcinogenic materials found in firefighting.*
- *Vice-Chair Heppel added that he likes to acknowledge "years of exposure," with Chief Merlino being a 30-year member and not a 3-year member, as well as the evolution of PPE in the fire service, which has been substantial. If one reviews the early days of his career, his exposures were probably greater than those found today with our current safety measures.*
- *Member Reese motioned to approve this designation as a public safety officer, as outlined. Member Daniel seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote.*

- *Member Daniel motioned to approve the death of Chief Merlino as qualifying, as defined by statute. Vice-Chair Heppel seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote.*
- *Member Reese motioned to approve Kameron Merlino as an eligible beneficiary of the PSMFB. Member Nowning seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote.*
- *Member Nowning motioned to approve the lump sum award benefit of \$25,000 to Kameron Merlino, as requested. Member Daniel seconded the motion. A vote was taken by roll call where the motion was carried with a unanimous vote.*

6. Next Meeting – January 22, 2026, directly following the Board on Public Safety Standards and Training meeting at 9:00 a.m.

With no further items to discuss, Chair Cameron adjourned the meeting at approximately 10:33 a.m.

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