

Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP)

U.S. Department of Labor

FACT SHEET

Streamlined claims processing for federal firefighters with certain occupational diseases

On April 19, 2022, the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs Federal Employees' Compensation Program issued [FECA Bulletin No. 22-07](#), "Special Case Handling in Certain Firefighter FECA Claims Processing and Adjudication." This bulletin announced and implemented changes to streamline claims processing for federal firefighters with certain occupational diseases.

BACKGROUND

OWCP receives approximately 2,600 workers' compensation claims annually from federal firefighters. Of those, about 175 are complex occupational disease claims that include conditions such as cancer, heart disease and lung disease.

Recent developments in medical research found that federal employees engaged in fire protection and suppression activities **are at increased risk of certain types of cancers, heart disease and lung disease** as a result of the specific exposures that routinely occur in the course of their employment.

To develop policy in this area, OWCP contracted with **Dr. Steven Moffatt**, a nationally recognized medical expert in the field of firefighter illnesses. Moffatt is a member of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health Board of Scientific Counselors National Firefighter Registry Subcommittee. He has helped OWCP to develop new policies consistent with the latest medical developments in the field.

FECA BULLETIN NO. 22-07

This bulletin implemented policy changes to ease the evidentiary requirements needed to support claims filed by federal employees engaged in fire protection and suppression activities for certain cancers, heart conditions and lung conditions.

Specifically, claims would be deemed high-risk and qualify for expedited processing if:

- The employee was diagnosed with:
 - One of the following cancers: esophageal, colorectal, prostate, testicular, kidney, bladder, brain, lung, buccal cavity/pharynx, larynx, thyroid, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, leukemia, mesothelioma, or melanoma; or

- Hypertension, coronary artery disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pulmonary fibrosis, asthma, or a sudden cardiac event or stroke; and
- The employee was engaged in fire protection activities for at least five years; and
- The employee was diagnosed with a condition noted above within ten years of the date of last exposure to federal firefighting activities. An exception exists for sudden cardiac events or strokes which must occur while, or not later than 24 hours after, engaging in fire protection or suppression activities.

If the claim meets the high-risk criteria, **the employee does not need to submit additional evidence of specific exposures or medical evidence addressing causal relationship.** Their case will be reviewed by a district medical advisor for verification that the employment was capable of producing the diagnosed condition(s).

If the claim does not meet the high-risk criteria, it will be adjudicated under established FECA case processing procedures.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

- To help ensure **uniform consistency in adjudication**, all federal firefighter claims are processed by the OWCP special claims unit. This unit consists of specialized claims staff who have received specific training to handle these unique claims. Handling all federal firefighter claims within the same unit will improve customer service and consistency in navigating claimants through the requirements.
- OWCP's Branch of Regulations and Procedures is providing **comprehensive training** to examiners in the special claims unit, so they fully understand the new policy changes and to help ensure appropriate evidence is requested and accurate, well-explained decisions are issued.
- OWCP will provide **external outreach** to federal agencies including, but not limited to, the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security, and Interior, to explain new policy changes and procedures. It will also engage key federal firefighter stakeholders to ensure an ongoing informational exchange.
- **OWCP created a new subsection on its website** to provide the most up-to-date information on claims processing for federal firefighters.

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/owcp/FECA/FederalFirefighterclaims>
- OWCP will continue to **monitor ongoing research** concerning firefighter illnesses and exposures and will update policy as needed.

