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# LOCAL NEWS

## Helping those fighting fires

A bill in the House calls for a study of the rate of cancer among firefighters and encourages screening.

**BY PHILIP MARCELO**  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Providence Fire Chief George S. Farrell suspects that years of running into burning buildings led him to where he is today — living with cancer.

Farrell, 52, was diagnosed in August last year with chronic myelogenous leukemia, a type of cancer that results in an abnormally high production of white blood cells in the bone marrow.

While there is no way to determine what caused the disease, Farrell is certain that on-the-job exposure to high doses of radiation and benzene, a byproduct of combustion, played a big role.

A 27-year veteran of the fire service, Farrell says his situation is an example of the type of health risks that firefighters face and are often unaware of. "We know this job is inherently dangerous. But how many guys know they will develop cancer from this job?" he said.

In his department alone, Farrell said, "seven to eight people" have been diagnosed with cancer. And many more, he said, are diagnosed after they retire from the service.

The scope of the problem statewide is unknown because there are no formal studies, but a bill

SEE **BILL, B3**

# Bill

*Continued from Page B1*

making its way through the General Assembly could change that.

Last month, the state Senate passed the Firefighter Cancer Wellness bill (S-2887 Substitute A), which, among other things, would have the state Department of Health study the incidence of cancer among firefighters statewide.

Sponsored by Senators Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport; Dominick Ruggerio, D-Providence; Leo Blais, R-Coventry; and Rhoda Perry, D-Providence, the bill would also establish an education campaign to inform firefighters of the cancer risks associated with their profession.

It would allow the state Department of Health, the state fire marshal and municipal governments to enter into contracts with health-care and cancer-screening providers to establish prevention programs for firefighters and those in related professions.

"All of this is an educational process," said Farrell, who has advocated successfully in his department to make annual health screenings a requirement. "Documenting these instances and protecting our firefighters is in the public's interest."

The bill still must be approved by the House, where it is before the Health, Education and Welfare Committee, and signed into law by Governor Carcieri.

Timothy McLaughlin, president of the Rhode Island Association of Fire Chiefs and chief of the Pawtucket Fire Department, called cancer "the critical health issue for Rhode Island firefighters"

and said the state organization is pushing hard for the bill's passage.

"Each day, firefighters are put at risk, but one risk they should not face is an increased risk of cancer, and early detection is our best hope to beat this epidemic," he said.

Nationally, studies indicate that firefighters face higher-than-average risks of several types of cancer, including those affecting the colon, brain, testicles, kidneys and bladder.

A study by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health that was published in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine found that, compared with men in other occupations, firefighters had nearly twice the risk of brain cancer and a 36-percent higher risk of colon cancer.

The study also found evidence that firefighters had elevated risks of bladder and kidney cancers and Hodgkin's lymphoma. Between 1986 and 2003, the study recorded 2,125 diagnoses of cancer among professional male firefighters.

And a 2006 study by the University of Cincinnati, published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, found that firefighters face a 100-percent increased risk of testicular cancer compared with non-firefighters; a 50-percent increased risk for multiple myeloma; a 50-percent increased risk for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; and a 28-percent increased risk for prostate cancer.

While the studies do not draw conclusions why there appears to be a higher-than-normal risk of cancer among firefighters, Farrell

and other firefighters say on-the-job exposure greatly contributes.

During a blaze, firefighters could potentially be exposed to any number of carcinogens, including benzene, diesel engine exhaust, chloroform, soot, styrene and formaldehyde, Farrell said.

The risks of exposure are especially great in Rhode Island, says McLaughlin, of the state fire chiefs' association. "It's an old state with all these mill towns from yesteryear that are all oil soaked," he said.

"In pretty much every fire you're going to be exposed to something," Farrell said.

Modern firefighting equipment is supposed to reduce the risks associated with exposure, but it's

not always used properly by firefighters, Farrell said.

Too often, firefighters remove air packs when going into or near fires.

"It's supposed to protect them from the smoke and soot, but by the end of a fire, when it's winding down, you'll see the guys start to take the face masks off and leave the tanks because they get too heavy and hot," says Farrell.

The proposed legislation would establish programs promoting safe work practices for firefighters and work to eliminate those risky habits, McLaughlin said. It would also encourage firefighters to go for regular cancer screenings.

"This is good for the fire service in Rhode Island," he said. "This is good for our men and women, right down the line."

"In pretty much every fire you're going to be exposed to something."

**GEORGE S. FARRELL,**

Providence fire chief

[pmarcelo@projo.com](mailto:pmarcelo@projo.com) / (401) 277-7493