



Madam Chair/Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

My name is Caroline Johnson. I currently reside in the Town of Berlin and I am here today to fully support Proposed Bill No. 141. My husband was New Britain Firefighter Scott Johnson and father to our three sons, Zackary (13), Benjamin (9) and Jacob (9). From the time Scott was a young child he wanted to be a firefighter. That dream became a reality when he became part of Recruit Class 40 in 2007, but ultimately it was this same dream that took his life on August 16, 2017 at the age of 43.

Scott was diagnosed with Stage IV Colorectal Cancer on April 29, 2015. As I sat next to him in the hospital, we were handed photos from his colonoscopy that showed an “angry mass,” and we were told that he was about to go down an exceptionally long and rough road. This disease is an up-and-coming young person’s disease and the life expectancy for someone with a Stage IV diagnosis is roughly two and a half years. Scott’s life ended two years and four months after the date of his diagnosis. He was healthy, rode his bike 30 miles on his days off, was an avid runner, did not smoke and had no family history of cancer so how could this happen?

During the course of my husband’s illness, I stood by his side, supported him and was his voice on the days he was unable to speak because he was too weak to do so and that is exactly what I am doing here today, advocating, and speaking on his behalf and on the behalf of so many others that are currently fighting or have lost their battle previously. My husband was larger than life and was always the funniest guy in the room. So much so that three days before he passed away, he had collapsed at our home. Engine 2 was right around the corner finishing up a call and were at my back porch before I could even hang up the telephone with the 911 operator. Once at the hospital we were told his sodium levels were dangerously low and that he was having seizures. One of his fellow firefighter brothers came into his room and said, hey what’s up? Scott’s response was precise and to the point, “not my sodium levels.”

I have been asking myself the same question since his diagnosis almost six years ago, how did this happen? How did I become a widow at the age of 41? Why was I left to raise our three boys on my own? The answer is quite simple. The men and women who do this profession are expected to run into burning buildings and save lives, but what happens to them when they get sick? Carcinogens are not just inhaled but absorbed through the skin. This is a profession that must be far more respected and not taken for granted as these men and women put their lives and health on the line.

How could you not make a connection between his 10 years of service and his early death? Growing medical evidence suggests that you should. Federal studies show that firefighters, who are often engulfed in toxic substances at fire scenes, are more likely than the rest of us to be diagnosed with several forms of cancer. Firefighters have a 14% higher risk of dying from cancer than the rest of the general public. The presumption should be that their illness (cancer) was caused by the fires they were fighting. Lucky for us, the New Britain Fire Department pooled their sick time for Scott. He had exhausted all his sick time, vacation time and paid holidays. Worker's Compensation was not offered because the State of Connecticut does not recognize cancer as a work-related illness. This is completely unacceptable.

I have to believe that everyone here today has somehow been affected by cancer in some way, but if you have not, let me paint you a quick picture. My husband began his battle with 10 rounds of radiation which never shrunk his orange size tumor. At this time he was 198 pounds. Countless rounds of chemotherapy came quick, which gave him neuropathy, nausea, vomiting, and fatigue. Next came what felt like endless surgeries. Surgical procedures and biopsies to both his liver and lungs confirmed his Stage IV diagnosis. Removal of the primary tumor left him with an ostomy and liver pump. Nine months later he would go in for a follow-up colonoscopy only to be given the news that there was re-growth at the original tumor site. Out of desperation he began traveling to Illinois for additional treatments every 3 weeks until the summer of 2017 where things literally began to spiral out of control. Severe abdominal pain and CT Scans showed his cancer had advanced to his stomach and was now in his bones. He was using a walker and needed help. The day my husband collapsed at the house we had just come back from his Oncologist's office where we had just been told there was nothing more for them to do and that it was now time for Hospice. Scott now weighed 146 pounds. As I drove home our discussion was minimal because we both could not believe it had come to this. Scott did not want to die in a hospital room alone, nor did he want to die in our home for fear that the boys would never want to set foot in our home again. Pulling into the driveway before he got out of the car he said to me, I think it is time for my mom to come. I knew at that moment he sensed something I did not. A few moments later, he collapsed on the back porch and as I caught him I remember that he was dead weight and all I could feel were his bones, he was skeletal. He was seizing and vomiting. Engine 2 came as well as EMS and drove him up to the hospital within minutes. That evening he was placed in ICU where his sodium levels were brought up slowly. The very next day, his brother and mother arrived and were able to visit him in ICU. The next morning his levels were high enough that he was moved out of ICU and into a regular room. As I sat next to him most of the day, he could barely talk, nor could he eat. His brother came up to the hospital that afternoon and within an hour of him arriving I heard it. Scott's lungs began to rattle, it was the "death rattle". His nurse came in stating that his Oxygen levels were starting to drop so he was going to require oxygen. I had to leave to pick up the boys and bring them home from the babysitter and at that time he was stable. Twenty minutes later my phone rang, and it was my brother-in-law telling me I needed to get back to the hospital right away, there was no time to waste. I cannot tell you how I got to the hospital so fast or if I had even shut the car door or put the car in park, I just remember running through the hospital getting off the elevator, turning the corner and my heart stopping. Doctors and nurses were huddled outside Scott's room and I knew this was it. I entered his room to be asked if Scott was a DNR and I stated yes. He had a calendula on his face to help him breathe and I was told I had two minutes to decide whether or not I wanted him to be put on life support. I sat next to him telling him I was there and he opened his eyes and gave me a small smile. I made a promise to him that I would never put him on a ventilator and I kept my promise, as hard as it was. Somehow, his mother arrived as well as countless family, friends and of course his brothers and sisters from the Fire Department. As they shut the oxygen off a tear rolled down Scott's face and his heart stopped. He was gone. I now had to pull myself together to go home and explain to our boys that Daddy would not be coming home.

The time has come for the State of Connecticut to do the right thing for these Firefighters and their families. Bill 141 is hugely personal to me as you can see and the biggest fear I have is that I will somehow let these families down. Scott's death never made sense to me until now. I know that Scott's purpose on this earth was to not just be a good husband, father and friend, but to pave the way so that others will never have to endure what our family has. Scott is not the first nor will he be the last to die from cancer on the job. These men and women take an oath to protect others, but I will ask you again, what exactly does this State do to protect them? It goes without saying that Scott's death, as well as the individuals before and after him should be seen as line-of-duty deaths. His life was just as meaningful as those that are on both Memorial walls at the Fire Academy in South Windsor and, also at Headquarters in the City of New Britain.

If you take anything away from what I have said here today let it be this. Your neighboring states put the State of Connecticut to shame. We are one of the richest states in the United States, but somehow we do not have enough money to protect our own? Proposed Bill 141 should be unanimously passed. My hope is that you will do right by these brave men, women, and their families. That time has come, that time is now.