

To the members of the Committee on Labor and Public Employees,

Thank you greatly for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of proposed Senate Bill 141, *An Act Concerning Worker's Compensation for Current and Former Members of Paid Municipal or Volunteer Firefighters*.

I have had the distinct honor and privilege of actively serving the citizens of Connecticut as a career Fire Captain/Paramedic for the State and volunteer Fire Lieutenant for my hometown, with over 12 years and 20 years so far respectively. During that time, the risks Firefighters face have changed significantly. We've had to worry about the dangers of hazardous materials, technical rescues, terrorism, vehicles on roadways, changing building construction that fails quicker under flame impingement, and active shooter incidents to name a few. Today, you meet to discuss an incredible risk Firefighters across the country are facing: occupational cancer. Had you asked me when I started my career, or growing up in the fire service as a fourth generation firefighter, what would be my biggest fear of dying from as a Firefighter, dying in a burning building would have topped my list. My biggest fear now, and also the one more statistically likely to happen, is dying of occupational cancer. I'm not fearful because of cancer attacking my body; I'm fearful because of the burden and void it will place on my wife, daughter, and son. With no occupational cancer protections, my wife and children will not receive my state pension or continue to receive my state health insurance. If I contract occupational cancer, I will be forced to exhaust all of my earned time off and then go on unpaid leave. I will be forced to take a medical retirement just to ensure my family receives some kind of financial protections, albeit at a fraction of what they should receive.

In a three-year span I watched three close friends, coworkers, and mentors and their families greatly suffer because of occupational cancer. Had occupational cancer legislation been in place, as it is currently in our surrounding states of Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island, their journey through treatment and the aftermath for their families would have been much different. It's incredible timing that today you are discussing this bill, only a day after the two-year anniversary of my friend and coworker Lieutenant Heidi Vaughan sacrificing her life in the line of duty at the age of 40 due to occupational cancer. Heidi was the heart and soul of the University of Connecticut Fire Department. Her smile and laugh was infectious. Despite receiving treatments that would have forced most people to their knees, Heidi would miraculously manage to find a way to still come to work with a smile and even selflessly ask us how our day was going. She was fortunate that we were able to find light duty assignments for her to not have to use as much of her earned time off, but this is not always the case. She fiercely fought metastatic breast cancer during her employment not once, but twice. Despite receiving chemo only days before, she stood with hundreds of other police officers and firefighters as part of an Honor Guard in the blowing snow to honor CT State Police Trooper Kevin Miller at his Line of Duty Death funeral at Rentschler Field. Shy of her twenty years, she was forced into an early medical retirement only a month before her death just so that she could protect her husband. I was asked by Heidi to help her plan her inevitable funeral and be the family liaison between our department and her husband so that I would be by his side. At the age of 40, she was planning her own funeral and making sure someone was watching out for her husband, also a Firefighter. Please let that sink in. The last time she was in the back of a UConn Fire Department ambulance wasn't as an EMT comforting a sick or injured student. It was as a patient as we brought her from the hospital to a nursing home so she could

rehabilitate after falling down a flight of stairs at home because she was so weak from her body being ravaged by cancer. She never made it home from that facility. I have never seen my then five year old daughter cry the way she did the night I returned home from that facility and had to tell her that her beloved Heidi had passed away.

My friend and mentor Ransford Smith, Jr. of the West Haven Fire Department sacrificed his life in the line of duty at the age of 46 due to occupational cancer. "Smitty," as so many knew him as, dedicated his life to public service as an EMT and Paramedic in the greater Hartford region for nearly two decades and for all too short number of years as a Firefighter/Paramedic for West Haven. Smitty save numerous lives over his career that was cut short by occupational cancer. I went to Smitty's house to help him with some of his gastric cancer treatments and visited him frequently in the hospital. Smitty and I sat down and planned his funeral while he was still alive. I had to sit and help plan my friend's funeral with him when he was only 45 years old.

My friend and mentor William DeFord of the Longmeadow, Massachusetts Fire Department sacrificed his life in the line of duty also in his forties due to occupational cancer. Besides being a Captain with Longmeadow, he was the long-time lead instructor for the Connecticut Fire Academy's renowned Recruit Firefighter Academy. Nearly every firefighter that has graduated from this prestigious program in the last twenty years was taught at some point in their program by Bill. This man was the epitome of healthy living and physical fitness. We used to joke as students that we were pretty sure he was part machine. He was the quintessential family man that I looked up to not only as a fire service leader, but as a husband and father able to balance the hectic life of a fire service professional and home. I would not be where I am today in my career had it not been for the friendship, mentorship, and lessons provided to me by Bill. Despite his debilitating disease and experimental treatments, Bill forced himself to be present as much as he could for students and future leaders of the Connecticut fire service at the academy. His famous mantra of "One minute, One hour, One day" saw him through some very challenging times during his cancer treatments. A motto many of us can learn from.

These brave heroes weren't chain smokers, or heavy drinkers, or participants of some other modifiable lifestyle risk factors for cancer. They were Firefighters who were exposed on numerous occasions to deadly carcinogens that have been proven to be abundantly present in the fires we respond to today. Carcinogens that are easily absorbed into our skin despite the protective gear we wear and easily enter our lungs while we operate around extinguished or burning structures. We owe it to their memories, and the memories of so many others and families, to move this bill forward. The only suggestion I have for this bill, is to please include language that protects State of Connecticut and Federal firefighters, and not just municipal fire service members. This would allow the dedicated men and women of the University of Connecticut, Connecticut Air National Guard, Southbury Training School, Submarine Base New London Fire Departments and others to be included in this incredibly important legislation. Please approve this legislation to move forward and protect the Firefighters of this state like all of the states surrounding us already have.

Respectfully,

Anthony D. Ruggiero