
BOARD FOR VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS AND RESERVE OFFICERS

September 2007

A Word from the Executive Secretary

Brigette K. Smith

We have been very busy since the last newsletter (obviously, since the newsletter is late). The legislative session was a very busy one. It was a rewarding session for the Board. Two big pieces of legislation were signed into law this year.

The first added a vocational rehabilitation benefit to our relief act. The Board members and the Staff looked forward to this legislation because we felt it was needed. It was hard on everyone to see firefighters or reserve officers who were unable to return to their former employment flounder because there was no retraining available to them. Needless to say, we were extremely excited to pay out our first benefit a few months ago.

The second big piece of legislation added two additional board members and allowed reserve officers and EMSD EMT's to hold Board positions. As a result, we added two new members: Martin Spani (City of Lynnwood Fire) and Mark Watenpaugh (Cowlitz Co. FPD #6). We look forward to working with them and will highlight them in future editions of the newsletter.

Finally, we didn't have room in this edition, but Richard Kistler retired this past June. Richard dedicated 12 years of service to the Board and he will be greatly missed. It's up to Jay Hughes (Spokane Co. Sheriff's Office) to try to fill his shoes. It's not going to be an easy job, but I think Jay's up to the challenge.



Nicole Stauffer

Staff Update

It's time to grow again! We have gone through a period of restructuring and several of our positions have been reallocated.

As many of you know, Sandi Williams left our agency this past spring to be closer to her long time significant other. She is working at a bookstore, and seems to be very happy.

Irene Keiffer is still with us. With the new state payroll system, much of her time is spent making sure that everyone is paid on time and that everyone's records are being posted correctly. Because the nature of her job has changed and evolved through the years, we decided to streamline her job and she is now our Pension and Payroll Specialist.

Julie has worked hard in recent years to keep abreast of all the changes at J&I. That's a full time job for anyone! Because the title of Benefit Specialist was so ambiguous, Julie's new title is Claims Analyst, but her duties are essentially the same. Julie is an extremely valuable resource for anyone with claims questions.

In Sandi's place, we hired a new Confidential Secretary, Nicole Stauffer. Nicole comes from an impressive state government background and has really brought a lot of knowledge and experience to the office. Her main job will be to act as Brigitte's assistant.

As before, everyone is cross trained, so we are all able to handle any questions that you may have. We really appreciate all the help and support that everyone has given us through the years. We couldn't do our jobs without it!

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Legislature Adds a Vocational Rehabilitation Benefit to the BVFF & RO

Throughout the years, the Board has seen many changes to the Pension and Relief System. All enhancements are very exciting, but one of the best that we have had in years has been the addition of a vocational rehabilitation benefit.

Never before was the Board able to grant vocational rehabilitation benefits. If a volunteer was injured and unable to return to their former profession, but was able to return to some form of work, their disability compensation benefits would cease and they would have to find a job with no retraining. If they needed retraining, we couldn't provide it to them.

Three of our firefighters, Billy Young, David Williams, and Bill Scarpete and his wife, Kim, worked tirelessly with Representative Dan Kristiansen to pass legislation that would add a vocational rehabilitation benefit similar to L&I's to the BVFF's Pension and Relief Act. At one point, it looked like it wouldn't make it out of committee, but the Washington State Fire Commissioner's lobbyist worked hard to get a hearing. With their hard work, and with support from the Chief's Association and the Firefighter's Association, SHB 2147 became effective on April 17, 2007. It was somewhat retro-active and is available for all members who did not yet receive a Permanent Partial Disability Award, and whose injuries were on or after January 1, 2006.

As a result of this legislation, members can receive up to \$4,000 to be retrained if they are unable to return to their previous employment. We will first see if they can be retrained for another position within the same company. If not, they will be evaluated to see what other careers they would have a good chance of being successful at. Their retraining dollars can be used for tuition, fees, books, mileage, required childcare, and most other expenses necessary for their retraining.

Additionally, a member can receive up to \$5,000 for reasonable, required accommodations. For example, an employer may be willing to hire a member, but their office is not set up for handicapped access. We could help pay for the upgrades necessary to the office to enable the person to work.

We can't thank everyone enough for the hard work that was put into the passage of this bill. It is a huge benefit to all of the volunteers!

Physical Reimbursements

Not only was the passage of SHB 2147 a great piece of news, but so was the news that the Board increased the volunteer physical reimbursement rate from \$50 per person to \$100.

The Board asked staff to track the amounts that departments were paying for new volunteer physicals over the course of two months. In that time, the staff was able to document that the physicals ranged in price from \$25 to \$500. Board members agreed that it is imperative that departments carefully screen their new volunteers to ensure that volunteers being hired into departments are physically fit and capable of the demands placed on their bodies.

To better enable departments to do so, the Board looked at the average cost of physicals and found that it was around \$100. While they understand that the increased amount won't fully cover the cost of some departments' physicals, it is their hope that the additional amount will help to offset some costs and encourage other departments to either begin requiring physicals, or to begin requiring more stringent physicals.

If you are unfamiliar with this service, the Board will pay up to \$100 to ensure that each new firefighter, EMT, or reserve officer has a physical exam to determine if they are fit for duty. If your volunteers have never had a physical, they can begin now. As long as we haven't paid for a physical since they've been with your department, we will still pay up to \$100.

If your volunteer is new to you, but came from a different department where they had a physical, we will still pay for a new one with your department. We know that you often don't have access to those prior records and, even so, many things may have changed since their last physical.

On a final note, we will even pay for a new volunteer physical if your volunteer was granted a leave of greater than six months! Again, we understand that a lot can happen in that time, and members that used to be fit for duty before they leave may no longer be fit once they return.

For more information on how the volunteer physical reimbursement program works, please contact us and we'll help you through the process.

Accident Reporting Reminder

Please remember that it is state law that all accidents involving covered firefighters, EMT's, and reserve officers be reported to us, in writing, within 90 days of their occurrence. If notification has not been filed with us in the required amount of time, we cannot provide coverage for the claim. This can place a financial hardship on both the department and the volunteer since one or the other will have to pay the bills.

Additionally, a claim must be submitted within one year of the accident date. For example, a volunteer received a hand injury while in the performance of duty. He submits an accident postcard immediately to notify us of the accident. Then, however, he chooses to not go to the doctor until a year later when his hand continues to get worse. By the time the doctor's bill is processed, a year and three months have gone by. We will be unable to pay for the claim.

Likewise, if the volunteer did see a doctor within one year, but received the bill at home and didn't turn it in until after the one year deadline, we would still be unable to pay for the claim.

Please note that you can submit accident cards online. Just go to www.bvff.wa.gov. Click on "Forms and Downloads", and then on "Accident Report Card". Your postcard will then be electronically emailed to us via a safe, secured connection. No more postage stamps or lengthy searches through file drawers to find the form are required!

Once we have received your postcard, either electronically or via the postal service, we will mail a confirmation letter to your department. If you send a postcard and do not see a confirmation letter within a couple of weeks, please follow up with us to make sure that it was, in fact, received.

Domestic Partnership Bill

On July 22, 2007, Substitute Senate Bill 5336 came into effect. This bill established a procedure by which domestic partners could register and receive certain benefits under the law.

These benefits included visitation rights at health facilities, treatment consent rights, rights of internment, the right to see autopsy reports, the right to control the disposition of remains, the ability to make anatomical gifts, inheritance rights when there is no will, and PEBB (Public Employees Benefits Board) benefits.

We have had several questions about how these changes effect the volunteers. Under current law, the main changes are these:

1. A registered domestic partner will be able to grant informed consent for health care for a volunteer who is not competent and have the right to have health care providers disclose information about the volunteer's care to them.
2. A registered domestic partner will have the ability to donate the organs of a fallen volunteer.
3. A registered domestic partner will be able to make all funeral arrangements for a fallen volunteer.
4. If there is no will left by the fallen volunteer, the domestic partner will be able to claim inheritance rights in probate.

Although the law gave domestic partners the right to participate in the PEBB, it did not effect worker's compensation or retirement system beneficiaries.

Participation Standards Update

As most of you know, the Board has been working on the "Standards" for some time. In fact, we dedicated part of the last newsletter to this topic.

The Board is anxiously awaiting input from the Fire Service Leadership Forum. The Forum consists of representatives from all major fire service organizations. At this time, it looks like the Forum will be ready to present its written input to the Board at the Board's October 19, 2007 meeting. We know that the Forum has been working hard on their recommendation, and we are excited to see it.

Once that recommendation is received, the Board will review all the feedback received to date and begin to work on a new WAC draft. After the new version is drafted, the Board will gather more input and begin the WAC process.

Please feel free to contact the Board staff at any time for additional updates.

We Want You!

...to fill out a survey. We know it's not as exciting as it seems, however the Board values everyone's opinion. In the past, the Board sometimes has received conflicting messages regarding where constituents would like to see the pension system go. As a result, the Board is going to try to survey the entire volunteer fire service and law enforcement community to gather input into developing a ten year plan.

The Board will be asking firefighters, EMT's, reserve officers, fire chiefs, police chiefs, sheriffs, commissioners, and retirees to give input on the benefit enhancements that everyone would most like to see, and how much extra everyone would be willing to pay to obtain those benefits, if necessary. The data will then be used to help the Board develop a plan for future benefit enhancements.

We will be working with all the affiliated associations to get the word out to everyone to take the survey. A link to the survey will be placed on our website at <http://www.bvff.wa.gov>. We anticipate having the survey available some time near the end of October or the beginning of November. Please keep your eyes open for further information and encourage all members to take the survey. It's a great way for their voice to be heard.

If you have any questions, please contact us at 877-753-7318.

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