
BOARD FOR VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS AND RESERVE OFFICERS

June 2008

A Word from the Executive Secretary

Brigette K. Smith

It seems like summer time should bring about a well deserved slow down from processing the annual fees in our office, but it doesn't! The Board not only has the summer fire season to look forward to (and the accidents and injuries that come with it), but we also are still working away at the participation requirements and developing a future plan to implement benefit enhancements.

If you would like more periodic updates on where the Board is at with some of these issues, and you are unable to attend the board meetings, you can follow along by reading the Board Minutes. Copies of the minutes are posted on our website at <http://www.bvff.wa.gov> under the "Archives" tab and "Board Minutes".

Benefit Enhancements – There are many enhancements that are near and dear to everyone's heart, and the Board has been working hard to analyze the feasibility of each one. Please understand that implementing benefit enhancements is a real balancing act and the Board has to try to make the hard decisions about what to implement first. That doesn't mean that the Board doesn't see the value in all of the ideas or wouldn't like to implement all kinds of changes, but it has to focus on the ones that are most affordable, most requested, and benefit the most people. Currently, the Board has asked that the State Actuary's Office provide new forecasted costs to

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Start Dates Explained

So, just where do those start dates come from? Believe it or not, they come from you. In general, the start date that a new member is given is the date that we first receive written notification that the volunteer is a member of your department.

In other words, if we receive a remittance form for Jane Doe on August 1st, Jane's start date will be August 1st. If we receive a faxed or emailed remittance form or letter, the volunteers' start date will be the day we receive the fax or email (even if the fees have not yet been paid...however, we cannot pay out any insurance claims until the fees are paid).

To ensure a good, accurate start date, it is important to get the written notification to us immediately. Please feel free to fax or email us the volunteer's information and just note that the fees will follow. This gives your department plenty of time to get the payment from the county or city and mail it to us. This also becomes important from an insurance standpoint, since we can also insure them from the date of written notification.

If your department would like a start date other than the date the form was received in our office, you would need to send some documentary evidence into the State Board Office. If the member was just recently accepted into the department (within a month or so), we suggest sending in any documentation that you provided to the volunteer (such as an equipment issuance list or a dated letter signed by the chief welcoming them to the department). If you are asking us to backdate their service for more than a month, you will need to provide additional documentation that shows that not only were they there, but also that they were active (such as drill records, meeting minutes, or call sheets). Depending on the length of time and amount of documentation provided, the staff may be able to change the start date, or the State Board may have to review the case at it's next regular meeting.

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Permanent Partial Disability Award Settlements

Permanent Partial Disability Awards (PPD's) can sometimes be confusing for departments and firefighters alike.

RCW 41.24.160 states that "where a participant sustains a permanent partial disability the state board may provide that the injured participant receive a lump sum compensation under the workers' compensation act under Title 51 RCW in lieu of...monthly disability payments". So, what does this mean?

First, the Board may elect to offer a one time payment based on the permanent loss of use (range of motion loss, amputation, etc.) that a volunteer suffers after an injury. By accepting the payment, the volunteer is not waiving their right to future medical treatment, but they are waiving their right to future disability compensation. It is up to each individual to decide if this is in their best interest or not.

Remember that, after the first six months of disability compensation, a member has to be "incapacitated to such an extent that he or she is thereby prevented from engaging in any occupation or performing any work for compensation or profit" in order to continue receiving disability compensation. Permanent Partial Disability Awards were meant to be the most advantageous in cases when a volunteer reached that six month point, wasn't totally disabled, but suffered from a permanent disability for the rest of his or her life.

In order to be considered for a PPD Award, the volunteer's physician must first be able to state that the volunteer is fixed and stable and as good as (s)he is going to get. At that point, the State Board Staff (usually Julie or Brigitte), will coordinate with the volunteer to schedule a visit with an independent medical examiner. Sometimes a panel visit will be arranged, depending on the injury. The medical examiners will completely review the case file and examine the volunteer. They will then determine the level of disability suffered by the volunteer and write a report to the Board detailing the history of the injury, the treatment, and the level of disability in L&I terms.

The Board sends a copy of the report to the volunteer and the department. If the examiner(s) felt that there was a permanent disability, the staff will also include an invoice

voucher for the volunteer to complete if they would like to accept the award. The volunteer is not required to accept the award and can think about it for a while.

Should the volunteer decide that he or she wants to accept the award, (s)he simply signs the voucher and returns it to the Board. At the next regular meeting of the State Board, the Board will review the report and the file and either approve or reject the award.

If approved, a check for the entire amount is mailed out to the volunteer within days of the meeting.

If, in the future, the volunteer wishes to seek additional medical treatment, the Board may elect to send the volunteer for another independent medical examination to help decide a course of treatment. In some cases, a volunteer may also be considered "fixed and stable", yet still need on-going care, which can be paid for.

If your department or volunteers have any questions about this process, please call us. We read all of the physician's reports we receive and try to monitor them to see when a volunteer is ready for a PPD Award. However, that information is not always in the reports. We want to make sure that we provide all the benefits possible to our members, so if you hear or see that they may be ready for a PPD Award before we do, please let us know.

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increase the monthly retirement pension to a maximum amount of \$325 per month and/or provide a longevity bonus for members who have already fully vested, but would like to continue in the fire service rather than retiring.

Pension Participation Requirements and the Definition of Firefighter, Reserve Officer, and Emergency Worker –

If you have never been a part of the WAC process, let us begin by saying it can be a very arduous process. Currently, the Board is still re-working a new draft of the Definitions WAC, modeled after the Bloomfield & Schrom vs. The Board for Volunteer Firefighter's Supreme Court Decision. Because of that decision, the Board is limited in how they can write the definition. The Participation Requirements WAC is more difficult to work with because the Board has to come up with an end product that is realistic for both law enforcement and the fire service and will fit the needs of departments of all sizes. Right now, the Board is looking at requiring a very minimal amount of training/drill attendance and some amount of responses and/or duty time. They are also trying to find a way to provide some exemptions for major medical issues or military leave.

Once the Board has finalized the draft WAC's, they will be published on our website for review and comment, so keep checking our website!

Remittance Form Changes

As many of you may already be aware, our remittance forms have changed. Because of the new changes, everyone will be required to use the new form starting with the submission of the 2009 Annual Fees. The new form can either be obtained by calling our office, or by going to our website at <http://www.bvff.wa.gov> and downloading it from the Forms and Downloads section. Any departments not reporting their members on the new form will be asked to re-do their forms with the correct version of the remittance form.

One of the changes that you will see is the addition of the Gender column. All retirement funds are required to have actuarial valuations performed on them to gauge the health of the fund. One of the things that Actuaries have to assess are the future liabilities against the fund. In a pension fund, one of the liabilities that has to be calculated is an estimate of how long individual members will live, and the amount of money they are likely to draw in that lifetime. Currently, men and women have different mortality rates. The BVFF & RO has never tracked the gender of its members, so the actuary has always had to guess at the mortality rates. Without specific data to rely on, the valuation that the Actuary can provide to the Board is not as accurate a picture of the future health of the fund as it could be if we were able to supply more reliable data to the Actuary.

The other major change in the remittance form is the addition of a line that says "Only active volunteer firefighters, EMT's, and commissioned reserve law enforcement officers are eligible to participate in the pension and relief plan". This statement had to be added for legal reasons as a result of court cases and on the recommendation of the State Attorney General's Office. While this has been on the new form for the last few years, we haven't prohibited use of the old forms, so they have still been coming in.

Finally, please remember that the remittance form must be printed on 8 1/2" x 14" legal sized paper. If you are unable to do that, you can email the form to Nicole at nicoles@bvff.wa.gov. She can print the form for you and keep it in the file until your check is received.

Legal Names

Please help us out! Throughout the years, we have seen many nick-names used on forms. These names can vary from "Tater" to "Tom". In both cases, they can create problems for us. When Tater tries to retire as John Doe in 30 years, we try to find a record of him, yet can't because he was listed as Tater Doe.

When Tom retires, everything is fine until we start paying him. Then the state gets information from the IRS that Tom's social security doesn't match with his name, because his name is actually Thomas. Because the name and social security number don't match, the state could potentially be fined.

If your department is used to calling a member by his or her nickname, it is fine to report them as "Doe, John 'Tater'" or "Smith, Thomas 'Tom'". We will make the appropriate notations in our files.

Other times when it is important to notify us of differences in legal names vs. nick names (or changes in name) are:

1. If the member is a junior or senior
2. If the member is a II or a III
3. As soon as a member legally changes their name after a marriage or a divorce
4. If the member petitions the court to change their name and is granted the request
5. Gender changes – please let us know if the member undergoes any gender reassignment procedures

Remember that it is as important to use legal names on accident reports and postcards as it is to use them on remittance forms. For example: we receive an accident card reporting an injury for Tater Doe. When we look at the remittance forms, we see that no Tater Doe was reported. The department will then receive notification from us that Tater Doe was never reported as a volunteer with the department and the department will be asked to submit documentary evidence to prove that Tater was a member of the department prior to his injury. While this is certainly a situation that we can correct, it does slow down the processing time for a claim.

Board Member Profile



Mark Watenpugh is one of our newly appointed Board Members. Mark has been a volunteer firefighter since 1983 and has been the Assistant Chief of Cowlitz Co. FPD #6 since 2004. He also serves on his department's swift water and high angle rope rescue team. When he is not working at the department, Mark likes to fish, hike, and camp. He has climbed Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Adams, and has also climbed on Mt. Hood. Mark and some of his fellow firefighters plan to climb Mt. Adams together this summer.

Mark is married with two daughters and four grandchildren. He has been enjoying time spent backpacking with his grandchildren, and hopes to spend even more time with them this summer.

2008 Board Meeting Dates

Board Meetings begin at 9:00 a.m. and usually take place at 605 E. 11th Ave., Olympia, WA 98501, Suite #207. Meeting dates, times, locations, and agendas are all located on our website at www.bvff.wa.gov.

August 15, 2008
October 17, 2008
December 12, 2008

Board For Volunteer Firefighters and Reserve Officers
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