

Alaska State Legislature Representative Carl Gatto

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Rep. Carl Gatto co-sponsors bill to help firefighters

(JUNEAU) – Representative Carl Gatto (R-Palmer), a retired fire captain with over 25 years of service as a firefighter and paramedic for Anchorage Fire Department, has taken the lead in co-sponsoring legislation designed to help firefighters who fell ill from job related hazards.

“This bill recognizes that firefighters, EMTs and paramedics who risk their lives for the public often put themselves at a much greater risk for certain illnesses and cancers due to prolonged exposure to smoke, hazardous chemicals, and other carcinogens. The cause of these illnesses should, therefore, be presumed to be work related in certain cases,” said Rep. Gatto.

HB 31 changes existing law to classify certain types of cancer, heart, and respiratory disease as presumptive in workers compensation terms. This means that, based on length of service, firefighters who develop a disease listed in HB 31 within a given time frame after retirement would be covered under a medical retirement; and the condition would be presumed to be work related. HB 31 only includes illnesses with clear statistical evidence showing a greatly increased risk to firefighters based on hazardous work conditions. In addition the presumption can always be rebutted by evidence of other non-work related risk factors.

Rep. Gatto noted, “This bill simply acknowledges the fact that when we ran into a burning building to put out a fire in the mid 1970’s and air-packs weren’t widely available, we were breathing in smoke, toxic chemicals, and carcinogens at a much higher rate than people in other professions. This frequent and high volume exposure leads, over time to a much greater risk of developing the diseases listed in HB 31.”

HB 31 was referred to House Labor and Commerce, HESS, and Finance.

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