

MEMORANDUM

To: House Insurance and Pensions
From: Ryan Trader, Olathe Fire Department – Captain
Date: January 25, 2021
Subject: House Bill 2063

I am a Trustee for the KPERS Board, but my testimony is my own and does not reflect KPERS. My testimony for you today is to offer a perspective as a KP&F member and provide context to this bill. I am a third-generation firefighter. My grandfather and father both worked for the Kansas City Fire Department on the Missouri side. My brother works as a firefighter in Kansas City, Kansas and I serve with the City of Olathe. Even though I have only 10 years in the fire service, I have been exposed to the profession my entire life and have heard the perspectives of firefighters dating back to the 1950s.

There is a simple truth at the heart of this bill; the fire service has changed. It isn't as much that the duties of the job have changed but the environment and what we know now has evolved. I believe the same sentiment to be true for the police force. For this testimony though, I am going to focus on one possible service-connected disability, firefighter cancer. I use this example because it is the most prevalent and applicable to this benefit change. Before I elaborate on this point, I want to quickly visit the demographic that this bill will benefit.

The bill was created for a specific and rare group of KP&F members, who dies from service-connected disabilities while on medical disability. As of today, all disabled KP&F members are treated the same, whether that disability is the results of the job or something occurring off the job. When a member is placed on medical disability for a service-connected illness or injury and then passes away, their beneficiary will receive 25% of the final average salary as an annual benefit. Contrast this to a member who dies on-scene or shortly following is entitled to a Line of Duty Death benefit or 50% their final average salary paid to their beneficiaries. This bill will be used for KP&F Members

who are too young to qualify for retirement. are on medical disability due to a service-related injury or illness, and then die from that injury or illness. Passing this bill is stating that the sacrifice of a police officer or firefighter that dies on-scene is the same as one who dies from a prolonged fight against their service-connected disability. That is why I urge you today to consider this bill and treat these members as a Line of Duty Death and in doing so give their families the same benefits.

As stated, I want to use firefighter cancer to elaborate on why this bill change is crucial for public safety families. Research and data collection for firefighter cancer have just begun, it will take years to understand the data correlation. The key is that the data correlation between firefighters and cancer is undeniable. Of the Line of Duty Deaths since 2002, 60% have been to cancer. An average American has a 40% chance of being diagnosed with cancer whereas a firefighter has a 60% chance of dying from cancer. We are beginning to recognize that young firefighters are dying from cancer that is job related and it is not just random as previously believed. The recent discovery of firefighter related cancer is just one example of a cause of service-connected disability death that is currently being overlooked by our statutes. HB2063 was created to protect the families of firefighters and police officers who have been unrecognized under the current structure and rightfully deserved full Line of Duty benefits.

I know as a committee that one of the main questions that you have is “How will this bill change affect KPERS?” A well-paid firefighter with around 15 years of experience in the state of Kansas earns around \$60,000. If that same firefighter dies of a service-connected disability today, his beneficiary will receive an annual lifetime benefit of \$15,000. With the passing of HB2063, that benefit would increase to \$30,000. A minimal cost to the \$23 billion dollar system is an incredible impact to a family that just lost a loved one. The occurrence of these events is rare because of ineligibility of the member to retire and a majority of the Line of Duty Death events are immediate.

No firefighter enters the fire service fully knowing the consequences of the job. I doubt you will ever hear one complain about the unforeseen consequences like increased rates of cancer, PTSD and cardiovascular death. Both police officers and firefighters have

come to accept both the risk of sacrificing their life on an active scene and the risks of running hundreds of calls per year that could lead to a life ending disability. I urge you to change the perspective on the definition of a Line of Duty Death and use HB2063 to correct the oversight in the benefit structure.