

Bedford 3

Fort Worth Star-Telegram
October 16, 2015

Bedford firefighter's worker's compensation benefits still under dispute

By Patrick M. Walker

BEDFORD -- The state association that handles workers' compensation claims for cities is appealing a decision last month to award benefits to a cancer-stricken Bedford firefighter.

Lt. Keith Long, who has stage 4 colon cancer, has fought the city and the Texas Municipal League Intergovernmental Risk Pool for lost wages for two years, saying his illness was caused by on-the-job exposure to carcinogens. The risk pool argues that colon cancer is not among the cancers identified by a leading agency as being caused by firefighting.

A hearing officer sided with Long in late September, but the risk pool had 15 days to appeal to a Texas Department of Insurance panel. Carol Loughlin, executive director of the risk pool, said in a statement this week that the administrative law judge's decision "is contrary to the guidelines set forth in state law" and that Long's medical bills "have been covered and they will continue to be covered."

"Our hearts go out to Lt. Long and his family, and we admire his dedication to serving his

fellow citizens by continuing to work while battling colon cancer," she said. "Situations like this involving a dedicated longtime public employee are very difficult for everyone involved, especially for the family, friends and co-workers. And it is difficult for us when we have to make decisions based on the law rather than our sympathies and emotions."

Long's attorney, Kay Goggin of Dallas, said in an email Thursday that she couldn't comment and that her client didn't want to be interviewed. She told the Star-Telegram after the decision in late September that the judge ruled that Long suffered an occupational disease in the course and scope of his employment.

Under the appeals process, written submissions and the hearing transcript are reviewed by a three-judge panel in Austin, Goggin said Thursday. The ruling will be sent by mail.

Bedford City Manager Roger Gibson did not respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Risk pool officials have told the Star-Telegram previously that the World Health Organization's International

Agency for Research on Cancer does not list colon cancer among illnesses caused by fighting fires.

Long, a Bedford firefighter for over 20 years, felt sharp pains in his side in January 2013. Test showed that he had colon cancer, which spread to his liver and lungs.

To try to obtain benefits, Long argued that he was exposed to carcinogens such as firetruck exhaust, heat, smoke and chemicals and that firefighters face a higher risk of cancer.

Without benefits, Long is not entitled to financial compensation and had to use vacation and sick time for his treatment.