Federal Fire Fighters Battle to Keep Pace

Federal fire fighters face a frequently hostile environment on Capitol Hill. In recent years, our federal members have faced attacks on their pensions, bargaining rights and pay — sometimes due to outright hostility toward the federal workforce and sometimes couched as a means to pay for other federal priorities.

“As fire departments across the U.S. move forward with new programs to benefit rank-and-file fire fighters and as states and municipalities recognize the inherent hazards of the job, the federal sector remains decades behind,” says 16th District Vice President Jim Johnson.

For two decades, federal fire fighters have asked and been denied some form of presumptive coverage for cancer and other occupational diseases, despite scientific evidence and the fact that more than 40 states have adopted some form of presumptive coverage for municipal fire fighters.

In addition, federal fighters’ regular work hours total more per week than any other fire fighters in the United States or Canada, with a starting hourly pay rate that is less than the minimum wage in some states.

The IAFF is fighting against numerous ongoing attacks against our federal fire fighters, including efforts to limit or eliminate official time, reduce federal pensions and limit pay and cost-of-living increases.

Meanwhile, the federal bureaucracy leaves little room for avoiding cuts to important emergency services or updating equipment. A battle to move federal fire departments toward fire-based emergency medical services (EMS) has been ongoing for more than a decade, but in many cases, the federal government contracts for private EMS systems even though the costs are substantially higher.

The IAFF continues to fight on Capitol Hill to advance the interests of our federal members. In addition to continuing to advocate for presumptive coverage for occupational illnesses, efforts are underway to ensure federal fire fighters’ pensions are based on the full pay received for their regular tour of duty, and to allow for trade time and to require blood testing for toxic PFAS, as well as numerous other initiatives.

Road to Recovery: One IAFF Member’s Journey

Meet Ray Glover, a 34-year veteran fire fighter and member of Memphis, TN Local 1784. His life is forever changed by seeking treatment at the IAFF Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Treatment and Recovery. Here is his story.

IAFF: Did your behavioral health problems interfere with your ability to function on or off the job?
Glover: I developed a lot of anger issues. I would easily feel disrespected, disregarded and ignored, and it would trigger my anger. It did not matter who [triggered me] or where we were, I would lose all control. Once I began treatment, I learned I was coping with job-related post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as complicated grief. The root cause of my anger was the loss of my 25-year-old daughter, on whom I had to perform CPR until the ambulance arrived.

IAFF: When did you know you absolutely needed to seek help?
Glover: I was at a fundraising luncheon on trauma and PTSD. The keynote speaker didn’t mention fire fighters and EMS first in his discussion of first responders. That made me really angry. He asked if anyone had questions. I spoke up. I don’t remember exactly what I said, but I went off on this guy in front of 100-plus people. A police officer I knew, who happened to be in recovery from PTSD as well, grabbed me. He told me to call the IAFF Center of Excellence and if I didn’t, he would. That was a Thursday. I was on a plane in less than a week.

IAFF: What was your experience in a treatment program exclusively for fire fighters?
Glover: It was the best thing. I was treated along with brothers and sisters who understood what I was going through.

IAFF: What would you say to other fire fighters who are reluctant to seek help for fear they’ll be judged by others in their department?
Glover: When you really need help, it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks of you. Once you have received treatment, others will notice the change in you and appreciate that you are back and doing well. They can also help keep you on track by noticing any sign of relapse.

IAFF: Since completing treatment, how is your life different?
Glover: I brought home tools for controlling my issues. Meditation has really helped me. It’s been almost two years since I got help at the Center. Sharing my recovery story helps keep me straight; it’s uplifting.

IAFF: Since returning home from the Center of Excellence, how have your crew members, family or friends responded to you?
Glover: As normal, as they always have; they never judged me. They just knew I needed help, and I got it.

IAFF: What do you see as the biggest challenge to staying on track with your recovery, and how do you deal with it?
Glover: When I’m struggling, I can lean on my support group of fire, police, EMS, military and ER nurses. One night I shared that I was worried that I was regressing in my recovery. A police officer told me, “Ray, people are still going to piss you off.” I learned it’s okay to feel emotions. What matters is how I use my coping skills to get me through it.

IAFF: Since you graduated from the Center, do you still participate in aftercare treatment?
Glover: Absolutely. I see my psychiatrist once a month, psychologist twice a month and facilitate a first responder support group once a week.

IAFF: Is there one takeaway from your experience you want to share with other members?
Glover: The Center of Excellence will only work if you let it. Also, everyone needs tools to cope with stress and manage emotions. Meditation is my best tool; I practice it at least five times a week for 10-15 minutes. Even one minute of deep breathing helps.