

Assessing Cancer Risk Among Washington State Firefighters via Data Linkages

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SUMMARY

Firefighters regularly encounter physical, biological, and chemical hazards to which most other workers are not exposed (1–3). As a result, firefighters may be more likely to develop certain types of cancer than non-firefighters, which are likely triggered by an accumulation of hazardous exposures over many years. However, the exact number, type, and length of exposure for each worker is usually not recorded or easily estimated (1–2, 4).

According to Washington State's (WA) firefighter presumption law, certain medical conditions, including several types of cancer, diagnosed in career firefighters are presumed to be occupational diseases. Historically, there has been no formal process for adding to the list of medical conditions included in the firefighter presumption law.

CHALLENGE

In a 2019 amendment, the law established the creation of the Firefighter Presumption Advisory Committee. Comprised of occupational safety and health experts, the committee provides scientific recommendations to state lawmakers about whether diseases should be added to the firefighter presumption law.

The Firefighter Presumption Advisory Committee has access to peer-reviewed literature about the risk of certain diseases in firefighters compared to non-firefighters but has limited information about the risk of firefighters in WA developing these conditions.

SOLUTION

Staff at WA's Department of Labor and Industries started a multi-agency data linkage project including administrative data (such as firefighter pension records) and health data (including data from WA's Cancer Registry) to:

- Assess the risk of developing certain cancers among career firefighters in WA.
- Provide state-specific evidence to inform policy solutions.

RESULTS

The Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) program at Washington State Labor and Industries are conducting linkages with several data sources to describe health and safety risks to firefighters. The WSCR provided cancer incidence data for the linkage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

WA Cancer Registry plans to provide data for the most recent diagnosis year for the linkage when it is available. The SHARP program can update the linked data with the new diagnosis year. We hope this effort will inform updates to the firefighter presumption law.

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