

Alexandria's Fire Chief to Bar Smokers

By Robert Pear
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"Smokers need not apply" — that's the new hiring policy of the Alexandria Fire Department.

With no known precedent, the department is adopting medical standards that will prevent the hiring of smokers as firefighters.

Fire Chief Charles H. Rule disclosed the change in an interview yesterday, saying, "We will reject firefighter job applications from any man or woman who smokes cigarettes, pipes or cigars."

The policy, which goes into effect next week, will not alter the status of anyone already on the force, said Rule, who ended 23 years of pipe-smoking last July. Nor will it affect paramedics and other civilian employees.

Rule said he would recommend the firing of anyone hired under the new policy who later is found smoking on the job or off duty.

"We're not attempting to alter anybody's lifestyle, but we don't want to subsidize destruction of your

heart or lungs either," Rule said. He noted that firefighters retiring with heart and lung ailments can collect disability payments under a special state law.

"Firefighting is the most hazardous job in the world," the chief said. "We don't want our people to smoke. It shortens their lives and their job tenure."

DONALD D. FLINN, general manager of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, and Michael J. Smith of the International Association of Firefighters, the national parent union, both said they knew of no other fire department that had adopted a policy against hiring smokers.

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up in a constitutional problem. They're leaving themselves wide open to a lot of litigation."

Conner, who quit smoking cigarettes last March, said, "It amazes me how these municipalities think they can govern a person's life when he's off duty."

He said job applicants might consider the policy discriminatory because the Fire Department already employs many firefighters who smoke.

In a survey last July, Rule said, the city found that about 50 percent of its 175 uniformed employees were smokers.

VIRGINIA, like about 36 other states, has a Heart and Lung Act designed to compensate firefighters forced to retire early because of a heart or lung ailment.

Under the law, Rule said, there is an automatic presumption that in a firefighter, any heart or lung ailment is job-related.

In fact, he said, smoking may have caused the problem or exacerbated an ailment contracted as a result of firefighting.

"I totally support the Heart and Lung Act, but I also want to protect the taxpayers' pocketbook," Rule said.

Under the law, he said, firefighters can get up to 70 percent of their salary in disability pay if they retire early with emphysema or another lung or heart disease.

Schroeder, the personnel director, said each employee who retires on disability costs the city, on the average, \$140,000 extra.

The firefighters' public image was also a factor in the new hiring policy.

"It looks ridiculous for them to go into a fire, get a belly full of smoke, then come out and have a weed hanging out of their mouths," Rule said.

"A battalion chief may permit his men to smoke at the scene of a fire if they're taking a rest. We'll try to get people on the force to stop smoking through an education program."

IN ADOPTING its new policy, Alexandria accepted the recommendation of Dr. Paul O. Davis, president of the Institute of Human Performance. The institute, a private company in the Washington area, has a contract with Alexandria to screen applicants for fire and police duty and does stress-testing of firefighters.

Davis said his firm is working on a physical fitness program for Alexandria firefighters that will encourage smokers to give up the habit.

Davis said he had witnessed the incongruous sight of "firefighters lighting up cigarettes when there was so much smoke in the room that you could hardly see another individual."

A number of scientific studies have shown that "excess respiratory disease is associated with the occupation of firefighting," as one medical journal said.

In addition, according to Davis: "Cigarette smokers don't possess stamina levels comparable to non-smokers. Smoking is one variable that helps predict an individual's field performance in firefighting."

Smoking habits are relevant, Davis said, because "firefighters often have to work with a limited amount of air, using masks and breathing apparatus."

NOWADAYS, with many plastics catching fire, chemical fumes compound the dangers of regular smoke.
The Labor Department's chief civil rights lawyer said he could not guess whether the courts would uphold a hiring policy such as the one adopted in Alexandria.
William Kloepper Jr., senior vice president of the Tobacco Institute, a trade association, said, "With all the progress we've made as a society and a nation to eliminate many discriminatory aspects of employment, it's distressing to think that any employer would be looking for a new way to discriminate."

One private with the Alexandria Fire Department endorsed the new policy yesterday, saying, "If a man is under the heart and lung bill and he goes out on disability and he's been smoking for years, he's just been contributing to his own problem."
Conner, the Alexandria City Council voted to "request" restaurant owners to set aside smoking and non-smoking areas whenever possible, but the city did not go as far as Montgomery and Fairfax counties, which this year banned smoking in many public places.

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Rule and the Alexandria personnel director, Rolfe E. Schroeder, said they would not be surprised if their new policy is challenged in court.

"I have doctors and sports medicine people who will gladly testify in our behalf," Rule said.

Michael A. Conner, secretary of the Alexandria firefighters' union, said he had not been informed of the new hiring policy.

"If they can't govern your age and your height, they can't stop you from smoking," he said. "Off the top of my head, I'd say the city is going to end

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