

CIRC

Ban on Smoking Stirs Up Storm

By Sandra Hemingway
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Alexandria Fire Chief Charles Rule may have started more than a new hiring policy when he prohibited smoking for recruits.

He has received calls from fire departments as far away as Atlanta and New York asking about the policy.

The Alexandria firefighters union has also received calls from Arlington and Fairfax County firefighters asking about fighting the policy, according to union president Joe Cronin, and the union has asked its lawyer to look into the possibility.

And there are rumblings that the city police department, which will soon start a fitness program similar to the fire department's program, may eventually initiate a similar hiring policy.

"I am concerned that a policeman be adequately protected by the heart and lung bill," says Police Chief Charles Strobel. "If a person is smoking, would that make him ineligible (for benefits)?"

The heart and lung bill was passed in 34 states, including Virginia, in 1972-73, to increase protection for police and fire department personnel afflicted with job-related disability.

Any heart and lung disability after passage of the bill and initial testing is assumed to be job-related because of exposure to hazardous substances and physical strain, and the localities assume full liability. The City Council has asked its legislators to try and get some state funding for the program.

The fire department started a fitness program in the spring. The smoking policy grew out of that and concern for rising city expenses in heart and lung benefits. Chief Rule also gave up his own pipe smoking after many years.

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The police are starting their own fitness program, possibly the end of January, and Strobel is giving up smoking after 26 years.

"It wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't come out and attacked the heart and lung bill," says fire union president Cronin. "I can agree with it (smoking) hampering you in later life but to tell a guy he can't smoke is like saying he can't eat at 12 o'clock."

Cronin added that the new policy would make it difficult for new recruits who can't smoke, working with other firemen and commanders who can. "How can you enforce no smoking when you are sitting up there smoking?"

Chief Rule pointed out when he announced the policy that he agreed fully with the heart and lung bill, and that firemen needed the protection of the bill passed several years ago, which legislates the assumption that any heart and lung difficulties developed by a fireman or policeman are job-related and the localities assume full liability.

The cost to Alexandria for such disabilities is \$180,000 a year, according to personnel director Rolfe E. Schroeder. Heart and lung disabilities account for the majority of disability payments, according to Schroeder, and all those on the disability have at one time smoked or are now smoking, yet less than 50 percent of the department smokes.

"I hope we don't win the battle and lose the war," says Chief Rule, "by having people lose sight of the fact that the heart and lung bill was the reason for it."

"There is no clinical or medical test that I know of that can distinguish a heart and lung problem caused by smoking (versus some other cause)," says Walker Merryman, assistant to the president of the Tobacco Institute.

"There is a statistical association (between smoking and heart and lung problems) and smokers get more than nonsmokers. But the case is not closed and we don't have all the answers."

"It is an element of personal behavior," he adds.

The Medical Advisory Council to the International Association of Fire Chiefs will announce next month its endorsement of the fire department's policy, according to Dr. Paul Davis, secretary of that organization.

Davis helped to set up the fire department's fitness program and supplied the data that convinced Rule to initiate the hiring policy coupled with a stop-smoking campaign in the department.

An informal survey of the few smokers (or few anybody) left around city hall and city government this holiday week revealed that a few changes are contemplated.

The Consumer Affairs office is working on an office-wide stop-smoking campaign, according to director Wendy Cleveland. "We are promoting consumer education and supposed to be setting an example. Smoking is not in the best interest of the individual or the general welfare."

Housing authority deputy director Harland Heumann said, "Since I am sitting here very contentedly smoking a pipe that's my answer," when asked if he had any plans to stop smoking. "I smoke for the enjoyment of it."

Deputy City Manager Clifford Rusch said, "Give up smoking? I consider it constantly and do periodically."

"I'd have to know where that question is coming from," responded City Attorney Cyril D. Calley. Then he said he had no plans to give up his pipe.

"Our children asked us to give it up for a Christmas present," said Viola Lawson, coordinator of the Community Development Block Grant office. "We said we would try. Now I've jinxed it," she added. "It's like tossing your hat over the fence, you have to go get it."

"Don't say I'm going to stop," says Rolfe E. Schroeder, director of city personnel, "say I am going to try."

"Our number is dwindling," he muses. "It used to be we were in the majority. Now I've started seeing signs around—like in the budget office—saying 'thank you for not smoking.'"

One office that won't be putting up any no smoking signs is human rights. According to director Judy Greene, it wouldn't be appropriate. But "I'm not at all uncomfortable if someone asks me not to smoke."

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