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Firefighters fume over smoking ban

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MIAMI — Bob Harris, a 22-year veteran of the Hialeah Fire Department, remembers when he would trudge out of a smoldering home or warehouse hacking and coughing and gasping for fresh air, covered head to toe with black, grimy soot.

Then he would light up a smoke. Those days are over.

The Hialeah Fire Department is the only one in Dade County and one of the first in the state to quit hiring people who smoke. Since October, new city firefighters are forbidden from smoking either on or off the job.

People who hired on before October can still smoke in the engine room or outside, but many, like Harris, have kicked the habit rather than face the hassle.

"They're always harassing me about smoking," said firefighter Jim Kidd. "They say I should quit smoking, it's bad for me and so on."

Kidd said in some stations no one else smokes and he can feel the tension when he lights up.

The Hialeah firefighters' union is all for the new policy.

"It's really a health issue," said union President Michael McCann, who figures that only about 35 of Hialeah's 207 firefighters still smoke. "Heart and lung disease is the No. 1 killer of firefighters. We're already exposed to high levels of smoke and toxic chemicals and smoking can't help the situation."

However, some firefighters who haven't sworn off cigarettes say there is something about fighting a fire that makes you want to light up when the job is done.

Kidd believes nicotine cravings are activated by working inside a smoke-filled building. Although he concedes his stamina is curtailed somewhat by smoking, Kidd — who is 5 foot 10 and weighs 170 pounds — considers himself in excellent condition for a man of 49.

Hialeah soon may not be the only Dade fire department to shun smokers. The Professional Firefighters of Florida is backing a bill in the Legislature that would make the policy a

mandatory statewide condition of employment. As in Hialeah, the smoking ban would apply only to new-hires.

James Brannock, Metro-Dade Fire Department assistant chief, said he has received a copy of Hialeah's policy and would like to see a similar rule adopted by the county — if the union agrees.

Hialeah officials admit they would have a hard time busting someone for smoking off the job. If they ever do, they might have to answer to the ACLU.

Robyn Blumner, executive director of American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, said the off-duty requirements may violate constitutional rights of privacy.

"We're not going to challenge the contractual agreement in Hialeah, but we will be monitoring any state legislation and will seriously consider mounting a challenge if legislation is enacted," she said.

Hialeah Fire Chief Thomas Hyle said the new policy protects firefighters who may someday become

disabled.

A firefighter disabled because of heart or lung disease, hypertension or tuberculosis is eligible for an annual disability allowance equal to 75 percent of his or her salary, due to laws that presume the illness developed as a result of the job, Hyle said.

"But if a firefighter smokes three packs of cigarettes a day for 25 years, how can we know for certain that his disability was caused by the stress of the job, or because of toxic materials and smoke inhaled over the years?" Hyle asked. "Why should the taxpayers be burdened with having to pay that disability for the rest of the firefighter's life? Take out the smoking and we can say for sure the disability was a result of the job."

"I just hope the city doesn't get religious about it," said firefighter John Pocock, a smoker. "What gets me is that some of these guys go out drinking in bars all night where there is a lot of smoke and then they come to the station house and complain about smoking."