

FL Hiring Disc.

cc: Minshew
Woodson
Avedon

4C/Tallahassee Democrat/Tue., March 14, 1989

Smoking ban proposed for state's firefighters

Associated Press

The Legislature should block fire departments from hiring smokers, tobacco chewers and snuff users, says state Insurance Commissioner Tom Gallagher and a firefighters union.

Because tobacco use contributes to heart disease — the top killer of firefighters nationwide — the Professional Firefighters of Florida has joined Gallagher, who also is state fire marshal, in backing a bill prohibiting newly hired firefighters from using tobacco.

The requirement would exempt firefighters already employed, said Bob Carver, president of the union.

"It doesn't matter what form of tobacco products you're using," Carver said Monday. "Whatever form, it is a health risk."

Massachusetts has a similar ban, as do 12 cities and two counties in Florida, Carver said.

The firefighters group represents 11,000 paramedics and firefighters and 105 city and county fire departments. The fire marshal's office oversees fire departments in Florida.

Gallagher's office already spends \$250,000 a year on smoke-ending programs for the state's 16,000 firefighters. The program has helped lower the incidence of smoking from 40 percent to 22 percent in five years, he said.

Because firefighters are exposed to smoke, toxic chemicals

and high stress levels, they are prime victims for heart attacks, cardiologists say. Add smoking, high blood pressure and being overweight to the list and risks skyrocket.

According to the International Association of Firefighters, most firefighter deaths in the line of duty are caused by heart attacks.

Thirty-two percent of the deaths are caused by heart attacks, while burns account for only 4 percent of on-duty deaths and building collapses account for 12 percent of on-duty deaths, the association reports. Heart disease is the reason most firefighters are forced to leave their jobs, it added.

The problem is so prevalent that in Florida, cities and counties must compensate firefighters under workers' compensation for a heart attack, considered an on-the-job hazard.

Last year, 200 Florida firefighters were disabled with heart attacks, Carver said.

"We believe that our proposal will save cities and counties a lot of money in workers' compensation claims and days lost on the job when a firefighter is sick," Carver said. "It will prevent illness and the loss of a productive employee."

The firefighters' group proposed a similar tobacco ban among firefighters last year that failed because it had no Senate sponsor.

TIFL 0041398