

THE LAW

COMPENSATION

Firefighter risks recognised

MPs propose compensation changes.

Firefighters who develop cancer as a result of their work would have easier access to compensation under a private member's bill introduced in the House of Representatives.

Greens MP Adam Bandt (Melbourne, Vic) introduced the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (Fair Protection for Firefighters) Bill 2011 into the House, supported by Liberal Russell Broadbent (McMillan, Vic) and Labor's Maria Vamvakinou (Calwell, Vic).

All three MPs agreed that firefighters face long-term health risks that are often overlooked.

"There is no longer any debate about whether firefighting increases the risk of cancer," Mr Bandt said. "Firefighters start out being 20 per cent healthier than the average member of the public, but after five years the average firefighter will have twice the risk of contracting leukaemia, and after several years in the job male firefighters can find themselves up to 10 times more likely to contract testicular cancer."

If a person has worked as a firefighter for a certain period of time before diagnosis with one of seven types of cancer, their job will be seen as the dominant cause of the illness.

"The bill identifies the main cancer related illnesses which have disproportionate rates of incidence amongst firefighters when compared with the general population," Ms Vamvakinou explained.

"This particular matter is about firefighters, their future and what they do for us," Mr Broadbent told the House. "This parliament, rising above all other concerns, has to address the issues faced by a very specialised group in our community." •

EMPLOYMENT

On cue for job seekers

Tougher rules for keeping appointments.

Penalties for job seekers who fail to attend appointments or job-related activities will be toughened under new rules that have recently come into force.

The Social Security Legislation Amendment (Job Seeker Compliance) Act, which passed both houses of parliament, requires Centrelink to suspend payment of income support if a job seeker fails to attend an appointment.

Payments resume (with back-pay) when the person agrees to attend a rescheduled appointment.

If they fail to attend that rescheduled appointment without reasonable excuse, payments would be suspended until they do attend an appointment, and there will be no back-pay for the period since the second attendance failure.

Minister for Employment Participation Kate Ellis said the changes are required to lift the rate of attendance at appointments with employment service providers, which stands at 55 per cent.

"I believe that attendance at appointments – appointments designed to help job seekers get into work – can and must improve," Ms Ellis said.

"These changes will give the job seeker no choice but to agree to

re-engage with employment services and be serious about finding work – if they want to receive income support."

The House of Representatives Employment Committee supported the legislation, making a number of recommendations including providing plain-English explanations of the changes to affected people and additional training and guidance for staff.

The government accepted amendments to the legislation recommended by the committee, including the proposal to increase Centrelink's flexibility in deciding whether the job seeker could have given prior notification of their non-attendance.

While the opposition supported the legislation, the Greens opposed it, arguing there was insufficient evidence to justify and explain the measures and that disadvantaged groups will be the hardest hit.

"What we do know from the figures is that 20 per cent of people who miss appointments are Indigenous Australians and that 47 per cent of the people who miss appointments are young people," Adam Bandt (Melbourne, Vic) said. •



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