



# THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

## A tough loss' for firefighters, his death is ruled in the line of duty for Whatcom

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A former Whatcom County firefighter who died of cancer this week is being listed as a line-of-duty fatality under state law that classifies certain kinds of cancer as job-related.

Firefighter John Swobody died Monday night after a years-long battle with lung cancer, said Chief William Pernet of North Whatcom Fire and Rescue.

"He was definitely a great guy. It was a tough loss for us," Pernet said Thursday.

Swobody, 54, died at his Marysville home, surrounded by friends and family.

Following fire service tradition, a procession of fire apparatus escorted his body to a Bellingham mortuary.

Swobody's death is the first line-of-duty death for North Whatcom Fire and the second line of duty death of a firefighter this year in Whatcom County.

Robert Spinner, 50, interim chief of the Lynden Fire Department, suffered [a fatal heart attack](#) while exercising on duty in July 2017.

"John's contributions to the fire service in Whatcom County extended well beyond the boundaries of North Whatcom and his loss will be felt by our entire community," Bellingham Fire Department tweeted Thursday.

Firefighters and others posted tributes to firefighter John Swobody on their social media pages.

**Bellingham/Whatcom Fire Fighters Local 106** Courtesy to The Bellingham Herald

Dozens of firefighters throughout Whatcom County used their social media pages to honor Swobody, including Bellingham/Whatcom Fire Fighters Local 106 of the International Association of Fire Fighters.

"Our thoughts are with the Swobody family and the members of North Whatcom Fire and Rescue," Local 106 firefighter Dave Pethic said in a statement.

"John will be missed by his brothers and sisters of Local 106," Pethic said. "We will not forget his service to our community. John's passing is a tragic reminder that cancer in the fire service is real and impacts the lives of first responders throughout our state every day."

Cancer is now the leading cause of death among firefighters, the IAFF said.

Two recent studies of firefighter cancer concluded that firefighters face a 9 percent increase in cancer diagnoses and a 14 percent increase in cancer-related deaths, compared to the general U.S. population, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

At least 41 U.S. firefighters — volunteer and paid — have died in the line of duty this year through June 6, 2018, according to the U.S. Fire Administration, which tracks firefighter fatalities.

Pernett said Swobody hasn't been listed on official line of duty death records because the state Department of Labor and Industries hasn't submitted the required reports.

But he said L&I has been paying for Swobody's care and treatment.

A line of duty injury or death provides treatment coverage and posthumous benefits.

Washington is among the 33 U.S. states that legally recognize that certain kinds of cancer are work-related hazards, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council and the First Responder Center for Excellence.

This presumption that certain kinds of cancer are job hazards means that an insurance company must prove that a firefighter's cancer isn't work-related, rather than the other way around.

Cancers common among firefighters include leukemia, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, gastrointestinal cancer, and cancers of the brain and bladder.

An L&I official wasn't able to immediately provide statewide totals for firefighter cancer deaths.



Michael White, a firefighter with the Washington State Council of Firefighters, said the state of Washington first recognized lung cancer as a presumptive work-related illness in 1987 and expanded cancer coverage in 2002 and 2007.

White said federal legislation is under consideration that would allow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to collect data on firefighter illnesses through a national cancer registry.

Pernett said Swobody was well-known around Whatcom County and had nearly three decades experience in the fire service.

"He was just a caring and giving individual," Pernett said. "He encouraged a lot of people to join the fire service over the years."

Swobody was hired as a full-time firefighter by North Whatcom in 1999 after years as a volunteer.

He held several posts within North Whatcom Fire — including firefighter, training captain and division chief.

Pernett said Swobody had returned to firefighter status while undergoing treatment, which often would require extended time off.

But he was always asking what he could do to help around the station.

Many co-workers still addressed him as "chief."

"He wanted to come back as much as he could while he was sick," Pernet said.

Swobody retired three months ago, Pernet said, after having worked mostly at Station 63 on Birch Bay-Lynden Road and at Station 61 in Blaine.

He is survived by his wife, Annette Swobody, and three grown children.

A memorial service will be 10 a.m. June 16 at Christ the King Church, 4173 Meridian St.

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