

January 2008

Boston Firefighter Disability Retirement Trends

Disproportionate growth raises questions of legitimacy

As first reported by The Boston Globe on January 11, the number of Boston firefighters retiring with disability pensions has grown at an alarming rate over the past three years. The disproportionate growth of disability retirements for firefighters raises a serious question about the legitimacy of some of these retirements. Firefighters include the more senior Deputy Chiefs and District Chiefs since they all belong to the same union.

Firefighters have a dangerous job and statistically they have a higher risk of suffering a heart attack or developing cancer than other occupations. Nevertheless, these numbers are too mind-boggling and costly to ignore.

As shown below, disability retirements averaged about 55% over the four years from 2001 to 2004, which itself is high for a public safety department. However, from 2005 through 2007, Boston firefighter disability retirements averaged 74% of all firefighter retirements. Firefighters with disability pensions receive 72% of their pay tax free.

Equally disturbing is the extraordinary rise of disability retirements of firefighters injured while temporarily serving out of grade in a higher level position. These firefighters are able to retire at the higher pay rate and significantly increase their annual pensions. Out of grade disability retirements increased from 13.5% of all disability retirements in 2001 to 52.8% in 2007. These retirements shot up in 2004 to 52.2% and have averaged 54% for the last three years.

The high point so far is 2006 when disability retirements represented 75.9% of all firefighter retirements and of those 63.6% were out of grade disability retirements.

Clearly, the magnitude of firefighter disability retirements in Boston requires further scrutiny and investigation. Greater accountability is required of those who are part of the decision-making process including doctors, Fire Department officials and the Boston Retirement Board.

