

Testimony of

Ms. Athena Schwantes

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Good afternoon,

I have the honor to speak on behalf of the National Fallen Firefighter's Foundation as the surviving spouse of Fallen Fire Fighter Russell Schwantes.

In August of this year, I received a denial letter for PSOB benefits from the Department of Justice. Their reason for the declination was: "There is no evidence that while on duty or within 24 hours of suffering the heart attack, FAO Schwantes has engaged in a situation that involved "nonroutine stressful or strenuous physical fire suppression activities or that he participated in any training exercise that involved nonroutine stressful or strenuous physical activity."

I could accept this, if Russell was a 5'9 weighing, 300 lb. male who suffered a heart attack while sitting in the recliner at the fire station after just eating a hamburger with chili cheese fries and a large coke. In that case, I would have zero expectation for benefits from the Department of Justice.

Instead, Russell was a 5'9, 195 lb. male who had worked 14 hours into his shift. Apparently he felt well enough to engage in his required physically fitness training. But something different happened this time. A call came in during the time he was at his heightened heart rate. He ran to answer the call, and then suffered a heart attack. Sounds like line of duty to me.

Russell went to work in good health. During the days before, he performed in his family life as husband, father and brother. He played 18 holes of golf with no problem. But when he went to work and performed those duties, something happened. He suffered a heart attack and died.

Let me give you some facts regarding the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act.

1. It has been 3-1/2 years since Congress passed this Act, which made the families of public safety officers eligible for the federal death benefit if the officers died in the line of duty from a heart attack or stroke.
2. 243 line-of-duty death cases have been filed under the Act, due to a heart attack or stroke.
3. Of the 243 claims that have been filed, only 44 have been adjudicated, and only four of those have been accepted as line-of-duty deaths.
4. Forty have been rejected and 201 are somewhere in the pipeline waiting to be decided. That is an astounding 91% rejection rate!

How can we allow this to happen?

It's important that you hear THREE profound facts I have experienced as a result of my spouse's death; however, it should not be a factor in the decision.

1. The loss of a Russell has produced painful and disturbing symptoms of grief--including anxiety, yearning, depression, hopelessness, despair, crying, fatigue, loneliness, and loss of interest in life.

2. I have questioned the value of long-term goals because I know that everything important to me can be taken away in an instant.

3. As for my two daughters, Holly and Morgan, losing their father has had a devastating impact on the assumptions that were previously held

Being a part of a loving family, they, like I, saw the world as a somewhat safe and orderly place. Regrettably, it only takes one shattering event of sufficient magnitude to change one's core beliefs about life...that terrible things can happen without warning and a child is left feeling unsafe and insecure.

Studies show that the sudden, death of a spouse or parent has extremely negative long term results: Including...

1. Interpersonal problems, problems with one's peer group
2. Mental health problems, like suicide
3. Physical health problems
4. School performance problems
5. Substance abuse

Again the question is posed, how can we allow this to happen?

I say, "NO." We will not accept these statistics for our children. Of course, no amount of money can ever compensate for the things listed above. However, by saying, "yes," we can remove the financial burden that could potentially reduce...if not all... maybe some of these statistics...Isn't it worth it?

Throughout this grief journey I have spent a lot of time asking God, Why?

He has met me in the middle of my monumental grief, and each day I reach out my hand to Him for support and guidance.

When dealing with things that were once routine and that now seem so overwhelming, I ask for His counsel to ensure that I am doing His will.

So instead of continuing to ask God, "Why?"

Now I am asking myself--Why don't you take where you've been and go forward?

It's now time to push beyond this tremendous pain and reach out to others who might be in need, and see to it that Russell did not die in vain.

I wish you could have known him. If Russell could speak to us today, He would say, "Please help the families of my fellow firefighters. Do not turn your back on what we have trusted in and have sacrificed our lives for." He would say, "If it were your family, I would do it for you."

So I ask. Who will govern your actions today? From whom will you seek your counsel? Saying "yes" today to this benefit will send a message to these families that our losses have truly been acknowledged. For us ... it's another step forward in believing that you will simply do what you wrote into law that you would do.

Thank you.