

Emanuel wants more medical exams for firefighters, paramedics on disability

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Chicago firefighters and paramedics on disability leave would have to submit to more frequent medical check-ups to determine if they could go back to work under new rules proposed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel Tuesday.

Emanuel's action comes two weeks after City Hall proposed a similar crackdown on police officers — all in reaction to a Chicago Sun-Times investigation. The investigation found that 347 cops and 390 fire personnel are collecting more than \$45 million a year in disability pay from cash-strapped city pension funds, plus millions of dollars more in taxpayer-provided health insurance.

The Sun-Times found several police officers collecting disability checks while working other jobs, including a lawyer whom city police pension officials have since asked the Cook County State's Attorney's office to investigate for fraud.

Thirty-five percent of the firefighters and paramedics on disability are paid more than \$60,000 a year, tax-free. They include Battalion Chief Patrick Kehoe, who gets \$91,113 a year and was on disability leave when he filmed a commercial for Emanuel's mayoral campaign.

Emanuel faces more of a challenge in trying to bring disabled firefighters back to work than he does with disabled cops. The police department has limited-duty desk jobs available for injured officers, but the fire department has no similar program.

Emanuel's proposed reforms include:

- ◆ Firefighters, paramedics and police officers on disability would have to report their annual incomes, thereby revealing their income from other jobs. City officials say some disabled fire personnel and cops might be able to return to work if they're already healthy enough to hold other jobs.

◆ Fire personnel and police officers couldn't apply for disability leave until they're examined by their departments' medical staff to determine if the injured workers are capable of doing other jobs within their departments.

◆ More frequent medical check-ups for firefighters on disability who are currently examined only every two years. Unless they're permanently disabled, all firefighters on disability leave for fewer than five years would be examined every six months. Everyone else would be examined yearly.

The reforms need to be approved by the boards that govern the city's police and fire pension funds. Emanuel's two top financial advisers, Chief Financial Officer Lois Scott and Comptroller Amer Ahmad, are members of the police pension board, while Ahmad is also on the fire pension board.

"These policy changes for the Fire Department disability program will go a long way toward eliminating fraud and protecting taxpayer dollars," Ahmad said in a statement.

Since the Sun-Times investigation, the police pension fund is examining the medical records of several officers, including Charles T. Siedlecki, who injured his shoulder nearly 20 years ago. While on disability leave, Siedlecki, 57, became a lawyer and took up big-game hunting, shooting and killing several animals in Africa.

The pension board has asked the Cook County State's Attorney's office to investigate Siedlecki because he submitted doctors' reports saying he can't safely fire a handgun.