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# Firefighters' Survivor Benefits Value Some Lives Over Others

By JACK HEALY

DENVER — As a wilderness firefighter, Caleb Renno hiked over mountains until his heels bled, living out of tents and eating packaged food for weeks at a time in rugged corners of the burning West. He did not love the work, but like many young adults in southern Oregon, he knew he could always find steady pay fighting fires.

In 2008, while fighting a blaze in the mountains of Northern California, Mr. Renno and eight other people were killed in a helicopter crash, and his parents tried to seek federal benefits under a government program for the families of first responders who die on the job. But Mr. Renno, 21, was a contract firefighter, paid by a private company. The government denied his parents' application.

“It’s just a horrible inequity,” said his mother, Catherine Renno. “These guys were doing some of the hardest firefighting there was, period. They were on the front lines. They work the line right next to the Forest Service workers. The only difference is that if one of them dies, they’re not going to get benefits.”

In life, firefighters from disparate states and backgrounds work side by side, fighting the same blazes on the same terrain. But in death, families say, they are sifted into different categories based on their official employment status.

Whether they were full time or part time and whether they were employed by local, state or federal governments or private contractors can make a difference amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars, providing some families with a financial lifeline from the government and others with barely enough to pay for a funeral.

Questions about how to compensate these families have a greater resonance this year, one of the deadliest for wildfire crews in a decade. It has been a summer of tearful remembrances and makeshift memorials from North Carolina to Oregon to central Arizona, where [19 members of the elite Granite Mountain Hotshots squad](#) died in the chaparral mountains. In all, at least 26 wilderness firefighters have died this year, according to government figures, and blazes are still raging across the West.

On Sunday, about 1,200 firefighters continued to battle a wildfire that has threatened ski homes and small towns in the mountains of central Idaho. The blaze, ignited by lightning this month, has forced the evacuation of about 2,250 homes and has grown to more than 150 square miles, but it has not led to any deaths or serious injuries, fire officials said.

Now, as relatives of firefighters who have died begin navigating thickets of insurance claims and benefits paperwork, some are criticizing what they call flawed and unfair government rules that create a posthumous imbalance among firefighting families.

In Prescott, Ariz., the wife and the father of Andrew Ashcraft, 29, one of the Granite Mountain Hotshots killed in late June, [publicly protested](#) after the city denied the family lifetime benefits, because officials said Mr. Ashcraft had not been a full-time employee.

Of the 19 firefighters killed there, 13 were considered temporary or seasonal. In an [online petition](#), the family says that Mr. Ashcraft had been working 40-hour weeks and that they are now trying to “provide a secure future” for his four children.

In a statement, Prescott officials said the city had to follow employment laws as it paid out benefits, and could not reclassify the seasonal firefighters as full-time workers. Therefore, only the six firefighters who were considered full-time employees received the city benefits.

The families of all 19 of the firefighters are likely to be eligible for a one-time payment of \$328,612 from the federal government’s Public Safety Officers’ Benefits Program. That program, created nearly four decades ago, compensates the families of police officers, firefighters and other first responders who die in the line of duty. It covers seasonal and volunteer fire crews working for local, state or federal governments, but generally excludes contract workers who are employed by private companies.

“Employees of private contractors do not fall within these requirements,” the Bureau of Justice Assistance, which runs the program, said in a statement.

These for-hire firefighters represent a huge portion of the nation’s wildfire crews. Across the country, there are about 11,500 privately employed firefighters ready to be dispatched as needed to fight wildfires, said Debbie Miley, the executive director of the [National Wildfire Suppression Association](#). Hundreds more fly helicopters and air tankers to monitor fires and douse flames from above.

They work for more than 150 private firms, digging fire lines, driving bulldozers and trucks and often working alongside the approximately 10,000 firefighters hired each year directly by the federal Forest Service.

Many of those drawn to this line of work are young men, often from firefighting families, who embrace the romance, public service and the camaraderie despite the grueling conditions, long stretches away from family and salaries that can start around \$11 an hour.

If these contract firefighters are hurt or killed on the job, they or their families are eligible for workers' compensation, and they often receive donations from wildfire charities and other firefighting companies. But when it comes to public benefits, Ms. Miley said, there is a clear line between contractors and government-employed firefighters.

"We know we are not eligible," she said of the contractors. "We know that going in. We take responsibility for that."

But for some families, it is a wrenching realization. After the federal government denied benefits to Ms. Renno and two other families who lost their sons in the 2008 helicopter crash, they personally prepared a PowerPoint presentation to appeal their case. They pored over photographs of the wreckage. They read detailed accounts of their children's last moments.

"He was doing the same work at the same time," said Paul Steele, whose 19-year-old son, David, was also killed in the crash. "He's not getting honored in the same way."

Vicki Minor, who runs the [Wildland Firefighter Foundation](#), based in Idaho, says she hears similar complaints every year from other families who are baffled that they were denied federal benefits after a loved one died while fighting fires on public lands. In 2011, the Public Safety Officers' Benefit Program received 345 claims from first responders' families. It approved 55 percent of them and denied 16 percent. The rest are still being considered.

Last September, Chris Seelye, a 61-year-old timber faller, was taking a lunch break from fighting a fire in beetle-ravaged forests on public land in central Washington State when he mentioned that he did not feel well. A few minutes later, he died of a heart attack.

When his daughter, Kathleen Seelye, visited local Forest Service officials the next day to retrieve his truck and equipment, she said she received heartfelt condolences but little else. No one offered grief counseling or financial help. She said she later received a \$2,500 donation from the Wildland Firefighter Foundation to help pay for her father's funeral and cremation.

Under the Hometown Heroes Act of 2003, public safety officers who die of a heart attack or a stroke on duty can be eligible for the same benefits as those who are shot to death or die in a fire. Mr. Seelye was a seasonal worker for a timber company, and his daughter said the family had received no government help since he died.

“He didn’t have health insurance; he didn’t have life insurance,” Ms. Seelye said. “It was like it got swept under the rug. It was just, sorry for your loss, shake your hand and push you out of the tent.”

For some parents, the fight over government benefits continues long after the last memorial and final condolence card.

In 2003, Dale Ransdell’s 23-year-old son Mark, a contract firefighter based out of southwest Oregon, was riding home for a break after 11 days of fighting a wildfire in the Boise National Forest in Idaho when his van collided head-on with a tractor-trailer. Mark was one of eight people killed.

Flags across Oregon dropped to half-staff, and dignitaries drove in for a memorial service at the fairgrounds in Roseburg, Mr. Ransdell recalled. But his benefit application was quickly denied. He appealed, waited and was denied again. He appealed higher up the ranks, and in April received a final denial. He is now challenging that decision in court.

“These guys did their job,” he said. “We’re going to push this all the way, as long as we can.”