

## Both the Senate and House passes bill extending Parkinson's disability benefits



*From the left: Gary Coons, Representative Sullivan, and Senator Merritt*

INDIANAPOLIS — A bill that would allow emergency responders afflicted with Parkinson's disease to become eligible for expanded disability benefits is now one step away from becoming law, thanks to the efforts of State Rep. Mary Ann Sullivan (D–Indianapolis) and State Senator James Merritt (R–Indianapolis).

By a vote of 49-0 in the Senate and a vote of 97-2, members of the full Senate and full House passed Senate Bill (SB) 376, a measure championed by Sullivan and Merritt that would require Parkinson's disease to be treated as a line-of-duty disability under an emergency responder's pension and disability plan. Emergency responders who are disabled in the line of duty are entitled to greater benefits than those who incur other types of disabilities.

Recent studies have shown that toxic fumes, like those inhaled by emergency responders at the site of a burning building, can increase the risk of Parkinson's disease. Sullivan and Merritt said that these studies necessitated the need for the legislation.

"If our community's firefighters, police officers and paramedics put themselves at risk of Parkinson's disease by combating a fire or attending to another dangerous emergency, they should be entitled to the highest level of disability benefits," Sullivan said.

"We had compelling testimony from Medically Pensioned (line-of-duty) Firefighter Gary Coons in the committee hearing for Pension and Labor that illustrated what our heroes face everyday as they serve us. There is a website up that provides valuable information and has hits and discussion from around the world."

Current law extends line-of-duty disabilities to certain cancers, heart and lung diseases.

The bill was brought to Sullivan's and Merritt's attention by Indiana firefighter Gary Coons, who was stricken with Parkinson's at age 33. On average, a person doesn't contract Parkinson's until their late fifties. Sullivan and Merritt both explained that toxic exposure from burning chemicals is one of the unusual circumstances that can cause early onset Parkinson's.

Gary Coons was a firefighter for 15 years before being medically pensioned with a line of duty injury. In 2005, he and his wife started to notice changes in his physical activities during the time he was going

through a series of surgeries to repair a shoulder and back damage related to my line-of-duty injuries. His wife, Trish Coons, stated that she first noticed symptoms related to an overall slowness in my demeanor, leg tremors while at rest, blank stares, and stooped over walking. At the same time he was aware of an increased stiffness, increased pain in my shoulder and lower extremities, smaller hand writing, and soft speaking. They both related these symptoms to his injuries and sought medical help from multiple physicians over two year period. The doctors offered therapies to mitigate the symptoms and did not relate these complications to a more complex neurological disease. Less then two years later the symptoms were getting worse and his right arm and hand started to tremor, he was stuttering, and they noticed that his head would jerk in quick motions around. They then decided to seek out a neurologist, after another round of therapies of treating symptoms. Several test and medication trials over 6 months resulted in a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease at the age of 33.

The average age of onset of Parkinson's disease is the late fifties. At 33, he and his wife realized that he had developed Parkinson's disease over 20 years earlier than is normal. The chances of anyone having early onset Parkinson's Disease at this age are less than 1 in 100,000, making it a rare medical disorder, and therefore more likely to be the result of "unusual circumstances." A toxic exposure is one of the "unusual circumstances" that can trigger Parkinson's disease. So, after a review of his fire department work history they found an event which provides strong correlations between the onset of Parkinson's and a probable significant toxic exposure.

In 2005, he was the lead investigator of a large paint warehouse fire. The contents of the fire building included several paint trucks (vehicles), painting materials, and paint chemicals, like Toluene, Carbon Monoxide, debris from burning metal, and several other toxins and neurotoxins. In reality he was exposed to many toxins during the 3 day investigation with little to no protective equipment (the scene was deemed "All Clear for SCBA (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus) by the incident commander. It was within a short time frame, his wife started noticing the symptoms listed above. Parkinson's disease normally develops very slowly. Research has shown, however, toxicity is the probable cause when the Parkinson's symptoms develop rapidly after a probable chemical exposure.

A 1990 study of Houston fire fighters indicated that Parkinsonism was significantly more common in fire fighters than in the general population. This was demonstrated by a finding of 3-4 cases per 1,000 in the general population compared to 30 Parkinson's cases per 1,000 firefighters.

Firefighter Keric Fitzgerald, who assisted with the bill, stated: "This is great success for our public safety personnel. I came to tears when I saw the passage of Senate Bill 376. I was thankful to be a part of the process of something that will benefit our brothers and sisters long after Gary and I are gone from this

world. I am so proud to have helped bring the right people together to get this worthy of causes passed into law and to help my friend take on this disease and help generations of folks that may be inflicted.”

Gary Coons stated: “I am very humbled and honored that Senator Merritt and Representative Sullivan took my message and efforts to the Indiana General Assembly. I realize that my Parkinson's disease is not a death sentence, but a life sentence and I must stay active. As a result, I developed a website [www.firefighterswithparkinsons.org](http://www.firefighterswithparkinsons.org) to provide a powerful imperative to get information out about the risk of occupational exposures for firefighters. The long term affect of not protecting and educating firefighters/public safety personnel could lead to the development of long term neurological degenerative disease, such as Parkinson's disease or Parkinsonism.”

Coons went on to state: “My message to public safety personnel is: Always remember, it's not how long you have been doing it; it's how well you have been doing it, protect yourself and your fellow firefighters, your love-ones need you to stay healthy and live long. Think of managing change to protect and educating you and your crew as an adventure. It tests your skills and abilities. It brings forth knowledge of best practices that may have been dormant. This type of change is also a training ground for leadership. Leadership is often about shaping a new way of life and paradigm. To do that, you must advance change and accept responsibility for making this change to better protect and educate yourself and your crew.”

This opportunity will have far reaching potential of going well beyond a simple change to provide a benefit to those public servants that developed this terrible neurological degenerative disease during their job functions, but to a proactive approach in research and education. This legislation is to help provide a platform to connect experts and share information to safeguard our public safety personnel from long term neurological degenerative disease due to occupational exposures.

#### **PRESUMPTIVE LEGISLATION FOR FIRE FIGHTERS ISSUES AND FACTS DEFINITION**

Presumptive legislation is defined as legislation that links a specific occupation, such as fire fighting, with a disease or condition that has been shown to be a hazard associated with that occupation. This means that if a Fire Fighter contracts a disease such as colon cancer, it is presumed that the illness is the result of occupational exposure to chemicals and toxins.



From the left: Rep Barnes, Rep Ruppel, Gary Coons, Rep Sullivan, Senator Merritt, and Senator Waltz

Representatives and Senators who helped Pass Senate Bill 376