

Coughing it up

Cigarette smoke allergy costs firefighter his job

By Judith Dwyer Berns
Staff writer

A Bloomfield Township firefighter's sensitivity to cigarette smoke has cost him his job.

Robert Margolin, 32, was fired Sept. 8 by Fire Chief Charles Lindberg after the department determined that his medical condition prevented him from carrying out his "normal duties as a firefighter."

The West Bloomfield father of two has filed a grievance against Bloomfield Township for both the firing and a 4½-month suspension without pay or benefits while the decision was made.

An arbitration hearing also is scheduled for denial of sick leave for treatment in the Environmental Unit at Presbyterian Hospital, Denver, Colo. Margolin was forced to use accumulated vacation time to get treatment when Lindberg refused to accept a doctor's recommendation, Margolin said.

Unemployment and workers' compensation claims also are at issue, Margolin said.

Letters from the fire chief describe Margolin as "uncooperative" in determining his medical status.

"MR. MARGOLIN was released for medical reasons," Township Supervisor Fred Korzen said of the six-year veteran firefighter and paramedic.

Margolin allegedly suffered severe headaches when confronted with cigarette smoke. His sensitivity is confirmed by doctors.

However, he maintains that his lungs and ability to fight fires are unaffected. "We wear protective breathing apparatus, and in 14 years of being a firefighter I've never had problems," he said.

Margolin said he spends much more time as a paramedic than as a firefighter on his job. In six years, he estimates about 20 actual exposures to fire, smoke or gaseous fumes.

What bothers him is the daily exposure to cigarette smoke at the fire house.

A Bloomfield Township policy restricts smoking to restrooms and

kitchens at township Hall. A clerk's office employee was unsure whether it was acceptable to display pipes and lighters.

A FELLOW firefighter, who asked not to be identified, said no smoking signs in the fire houses "aren't enforced."

"When you get 13 guys sitting there and half are smoking, it gets pretty bad," said the "non-smoker." "It's a health hazard — especially in the captain's office — it comes out from under the door."

"The ventilation is bad. I can lie down on my bed and smell it in the covers. My throat is always sore when I get off my shift."

The township did not act on Margolin's suggestion that he be assigned permanently to one of the department's smaller (two-man or five-man) stations with firefighters who are non-smokers, Margolin said.

Dr. John Scher, who treated Margolin at the Denver hospital, said, as part of his diagnostic report: "It is

clear from our experience that this man would be subjected to have persistent, associated with cigarette exposure."

"THEREFORE, IT is my opinion that if this man is subjected to cigarette smoke in the work place for any extended period of time, he would be anticipated to have troubles."

Based on the Denver report, his local allergist, Dr. Leonard Schreier, confirmed in an April 26 letter: "There is no question that exposure to any gaseous fumes will precipitate his symptoms. I, therefore, recommend without any reservations that he must work in a smoke-free environment."

Scherer amended that in May, saying in a letter he was referring to "only tobacco smoke at the station house in the poorly or non-ventilated rooms the men have to live in."

"The isolated smoke exposure at fires are acceptable. To equate the two exposures, as equal or even close, is not reasonable."

BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP, based

its firing on Schreier's April letter, without reference to the May amendment, plus an examination by a township-selected physician, Dr. Martin Charles.

"Based upon Dr. Charles' extensive examination, he has concluded that although you do not have an occupationally caused chronic obstructive lung disease, you are disabled and cannot productively perform your normal duties as a firefighter because of your intense uncomforableness and definite symptoms from smoke, caused from smoking other things, fire and pyrolysis," the fire chief said in a termination letter to Margolin.

The 70-member Bloomfield Township Professional Firefighters Association reportedly has budgeted a dues increase to pay costs of Margolin's labor suit.

Margolin was a unsuccessful candidate for the West Bloomfield Board of Education in 1979.

His wife is community education



Robert Margolin, ex-firefighter, coordinator for Scotch Elementary School. His children attend Abbott Middle School.

Family clings to rural life on 14 Mile

By Laura Clark
Special writer

Wendell Green, 75, feels as much a part of West Bloomfield as the large walnut tree that stands in front of his farm house at 14 Mile and Halsted.

Like the tree, Green's roots are buried deep within the ground of a township he has watched change dramatically during his life.

It was between the walnut tree and the large spruce that his great grandparents, Zephinah and Zerilla Green, built their first Michigan homestead in 1832 after traveling by stagecoach from New York state with their three small children. This log cabin stood on the south end of the 161-acre lot that the Greens purchased from the government that same year, only one year before West Bloomfield became a township — 151 years ago.

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