

Taking physical fitness to heart

By Vince Guerrieri

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Heidelberg fire Chief Henry Wissel's death from a heart attack while fighting a fire Saturday hit a little too close to home for members of the North Hampton Volunteer Fire Department.

Wissel, 55, died Saturday morning while fighting a blaze, eerily mirroring the Aug. 17 death of William Goodrich, a 56-year-old deputy chief who died of heart disease Aug. 17 while responding to a call on Sylvan Drive in Hampton. Goodrich's death was the first of three on-the-job deaths of firefighters from heart disease in Allegheny County. About three weeks later, Joseph Craft, 33, a new volunteer at the Universal Fire Company in Penn Hills, was found unconscious in the back of a fire truck returning from a false alarm. He was felled by a hereditary heart ailment.

"It's just a little bit too soon and a little bit too similar," North Hampton fire Chief Dave Hoburg said of Wissel's death.

Hoburg dropped 30 pounds since Goodrich's death, and he thinks that other firefighters saw Goodrich's death as a wake-up call. But North Hampton still doesn't have a physical fitness regimen or requirement.

Pennsylvania has no state mandate for any type of physical fitness requirement — or even for a physical examination — for firefighters.

"There are no standards in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania for physical fitness," state fire Commissioner Ed Mann said.

For most firefighters, death on the job doesn't come in the form of a falling beam or their oxygen tank running out in a smoke-filled room. For firefighters, as well as many other Americans, the leading cause of on-the-job death is heart disease.

Mann estimated that in the two years or so he's been fire commissioner, he has attended about 20 funerals for firefighters who died in the line of duty, and at least three-fourths of those deaths were due to heart ailments. Nationwide, 99 firefighters died in 2001, excluding the 343 who died at the World Trade Center in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Of those 99, 40 died of heart attacks. A federal Fire Administration study estimated that over the past decade, nearly half of on-the-job deaths of firefighters in Pennsylvania came from heart attacks.

Al Wickline, an instructor at the Allegheny County Fire Academy in North Park, said county firefighters are a little ahead of the curve and that more than 200

firefighters in the county take the 88-hour essentials of firefighting class each year.

"Most, if not all, of the 215 fire departments in Allegheny County require basic training even though it's not a state requirement," Wickline said.

After Goodrich's death, the six fire departments in Shaler started looking for a place to exercise, and Chief Mike Hepner, of the Undercliff Fire Department, said the township has reached an agreement with the Shaler Area School District to use the gym in the Shaler Area Middle School. Hepner said the fire companies lack the money and facilities to put their own exercise equipment in stations, and they want to exercise to try to avoid another heart-related death.

Hepner said the departments are trying to develop their own physical fitness requirements.

State Rep. Tim Solobay, a Canonsburg Democrat and volunteer firefighter, said state officials have talked about mandatory physical requirements, but they would add expense and potentially decrease the volunteer pool.

"Do you make (an annual physical) mandatory?" he asked. "If you do, how do you pay for it?"

Some fire departments take it upon themselves to implement physical requirements and regimens for firefighters. Mt. Lebanon, one of the few local departments with volunteer and paid firefighters, gives a comprehensive exam to prospective members, including a stress test in full gear and a sonogram of the heart, platoon Chief Kevin Maehling said. The department also has each firefighter under 35 undergo a physical every other year; those over 35 must take a physical every year.

The department also has an exercise room and mandates one hour of exercise for every day a firefighter is on the job.

Maehling said the program in Mt. Lebanon has identified heart disease in some firefighters, but it couldn't help his father, who retired from the department and died three months later of an aortic aneurysm. As a result, Maehling is even more vigilant with his health routine and that of his colleagues.

"It's very near and dear — pardon the pun — to my heart," he said.

Vince Guerrieri can be reached at or .