
Chicago Fire Department tab for disability payments: \$27 million

By TIM NOVAK AND CHRIS FUSCO

Staff Reporters / tnovak@suntimes.com

Last Modified: Oct 11, 2012 05:41PM

When Rahm Emanuel was running for mayor, one of his campaign commercials included a testimonial from Patrick J. Kehoe, who said: “He gets things done. He’s a doer.”

Kehoe was identified as a “retired Chicago firefighter” in the Emanuel TV spot that began airing in December 2010.

But Kehoe wasn’t retired.

The Chicago Fire Department district chief has been on paid disability leave after slipping on a driveway during a hazardous-materials call three years ago and suffering shoulder and spine injuries.

Kehoe, 55, gets \$91,113 a year tax-free in disability pay in addition to being eligible for free health insurance. It’s likely that Kehoe will collect \$870,000 in disability pay by the time he reaches mandatory retirement at age 63, since it’s rare for any Chicago firefighter on disability leave ever to return to duty. His pension is expected to top more than \$100,000 a year.

“Emanuel had no knowledge that Kehoe was . . . on disability” when the campaign commercial first aired, according to Sarah Hamilton, Emanuel’s press secretary.

Disability pay is a sensitive subject at City Hall in the wake of a Chicago Sun-Times investigation that found the city is paying \$18 million a year to police officers on disability.

The police disability rolls include officers who in some cases have started new careers and moved out of state while on disability leave and appear able to return to work for the city at least in a desk job but haven’t. The city spends an estimated \$3 million more to provide health insurance for the 347 cops on disability leave and their families, in addition to the tax-free disability pay, the Sun-Times reported in stories published

Sunday and Monday.

There are even more Chicago Fire Department personnel on disability leave than police officers, the Sun-Times found, though the fire department has less than half the number of employees the police department has.

Kehoe is one of 390 firefighters and paramedics on disability. Altogether, they are paid more than \$27 million a year by the Chicago Firemen's Annuity and Benefit Fund, the taxpayer-subsidized pension fund for city firefighters. Those disability payments jumped by 16 percent last year. Health insurance provided at no charge to disabled fire personnel costs taxpayers an additional \$4 million a year.

That adds up to \$45 million spent last year by the city's cash-strapped pension funds for firefighters and police officers on disability, plus millions more in free health-insurance benefits — costs the Emanuel administration says need to be reined in to save the city money and protect against abuses.

This is sure to be an issue in negotiations over new contracts with the unions representing firefighters and police officers. Both of those contracts expired last month.

In response to the Sun-Times' findings, Emanuel aides said last week that firefighters and paramedics — unlike police officers — are barred from working other jobs while on disability leave and said a similar policy for the police might help limit abuses of the system. "Among potential reforms being discussed for the Chicago Police Department's disability program is a requirement similar to the Chicago Fire Department's that those receiving disability benefits cannot hold a second job outside of city employment," Emanuel's office said last week.

In one case the newspaper found, though, Aaron M. Murdock, an ambulance commander who taught at the fire academy, did work another job after going on disability. Murdock suffered an unspecified injury while off-duty and went on sick leave, known as "layup," in May 2008.

After Murdock used up his sick days, the fire pension fund put him on what's called "ordinary disability" on Aug. 1, 2009, giving Murdock — who was unable to lift more than 25 pounds or carry a patient — half of his fire department salary.

The pension fund also gave permission for Murdock, a licensed registered nurse since 1994, to work as an assistant nurse manager at Advocate Trinity Hospital on the city's South Side.

Murdock, 47, gets \$44,109 in disability pay from the fire department.

He no longer works at Trinity. He filed a worker's compensation claim against the hospital last summer.

