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## *Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program* *"Hometown Heroes" Fact Sheet*

### History

- The Office of Justice Programs' (OJP) Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) is the agency responsible for administering the PSOB program. Our mission is to aid and assist public safety officers, their families, and their agencies throughout times of tragedy.
- On December 15, 2003, the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act expanded the circumstances under which public safety officer deaths resulting from heart attacks and strokes may be covered by the PSOB Act.
- This law created an entirely new area of eligibility under the PSOB program and it required significant implementing regulations.
- OJP consulted with several sources in the medical and public safety fields during the notice and comment period on the proposed rule in order to facilitate full implementation of the Act.
- During the comment period, we received extensive comments from a number of interested parties, such as the Fraternal Order of Police; the International Association of Fire Fighters; Concerns of Police Survivors; and other national police and fire associations; municipal police, fire, and rescue departments; PSOB hearing officers; survivors of fallen public safety officers; and individual concerned citizens.
- In addition, we consulted extensively with the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) and other experts knowledgeable in the field of cardiovascular disease and work-life-related diseases and afflictions.
- OJP carefully reviewed and analyzed all the information, and made many substantive changes to the proposed regulations as a result.
- These regulations, as well as updated regulations for the entire PSOB Program, became effective on September 11, 2006.

## **Review of Hometown Heroes Claims**

- To date, all claims submitted under the provisions of the Hometown Heroes Act are being reviewed by BJA and processed for claim resolution. However, just as public safety agencies, officers, and survivors of fallen public safety officers are unique, PSOB claims are unique and require different levels of review and outreach to process to their conclusion. Additional information is usually requested by the PSOB Office to help clarify or establish the eligibility of claims and beneficiaries according to the PSOB Act and its regulations.

## **Medical Documentation**

- As written, the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act established that when a public safety officer dies as the direct result of heart attack or stroke under certain line-of-duty circumstances, his death is presumed to have occurred as a result of his job, unless there is “competent medical evidence” indicating otherwise.
- Arguably, medical evidence of heart disease or high risk factors for heart attack or stroke in an individual could constitute “competent medical evidence” that the public safety officer’s health conditions alone caused the heart attack or stroke.
- In order to avoid this result, OJP developed regulations that provided a more relaxed understanding of “competent medical evidence to the contrary” (as suggested by national public safety officer organizations in their comments on the proposed regulations).

## **Improving the PSOB Program**

- The Department continues to work to ensure that all claims are processed in a timely, efficient, and compassionate manner. BJA is currently working towards the goal of processing claims within 90 days of receiving all necessary information.
- Toward this goal, in May 2006 the PSOB online reporting system was made available for agencies and survivors to submit claims for death benefits at [www.psob.gov](http://www.psob.gov).
- We are committed to exploring new strategies to process all PSOB claims more efficiently. A new case management system and database is scheduled to be implemented in 2007. In addition, BJA has recently hired additional staff which includes a senior benefits specialist, contract attorneys, and appeals hearing officers.

We will also be adding more claims contractors, attorneys, and forensic pathologists and will seek added help as needed.

- The PSOB Program operates under the principle that it is essential that all public safety agencies be prepared to effectively help the family, fellow officers, and the community move forward in the aftermath of a tragedy. This is a unique opportunity for local, state, and federal public safety agencies and organizations to become involved in promoting the protection of public safety officers before tragedies occur.
- OJP has formed important partnerships with national police and firefighter organizations to provide visibility and emotional support to this unique constituency. Specifically, BJA has partnered with Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS), Inc. and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF) to provide support and technical assistance to families and agencies needing to file PSOB claims.
- With the completion of the regulations and our continued refinement of the review process, Hometown Heroes claims submitted in upcoming months will experience, in general, a more expedited review.