

Ga firefighter s widow union say US rejected benefits

Congress passed and the president signed into law. The Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act, passed in 2003, provides \$300,000 to family members of firefighters, police officers or emergency workers who die of heart attack or stroke while on duty. Yet, the Justice Department has denied 49 of 59 claims until now, and the application backlog has grown to more than 200.n

Among the claims denied is that for the family of firefighter Russell Schwantes, who died of a heart attack in April 2006. In a letter to Schwantes' widow last week, the agency said that evidence submitted with the claim "has not established eligibility for payment." On Tuesday, Sandra Gunn, a spokeswoman for the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs, said she could not comment on Schwantes case because his widow has an opportunity to appeal and provide new information. Schwantes, 39, was 20 minutes into fitness exercises at Station 24 at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport when an alarm came in. Immediately afterward, he developed chest pains and was hospitalized. He never regained consciousness and died 10 days later. The 20-year veteran had no prior history of heart trouble and had passed two Fire Department physicals the previous year that declared him fit for duty. "That's the part that I can't seem to get through to federal officials ," his widow, Athena Schwantes, said. "Friday, he was absolutely normal. Saturday, he played 18 holes of golf with his sister. And then this happens on a Sunday?" After Schwantes' death, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health determined that "a combination of the exercise and the stress caused by the alarm was more than his heart could take," said Jim Daws, president of the Atlanta chapter of the International Association of Fire Fighters. Sudden cardiac death is the most common cause of a firefighter fatality, even ahead of burns, according to a June report by NIOSH. Nearly half of all on-duty firefighter fatalities from 1995 to 2004 were due to sudden cardiac death. The Hometown Heroes act was signed into law amid great fanfare. Then-Attorney General John Ashcroft guaranteed that all claims filed would be processed within 90 days.n

Schwantes' pension and Social Security, and some personal investments. She appealed the Justice Department decision Tuesday. On Wednesday, the firefighters' association asked Republican Sens. Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson to get involved. "No amount of money can compensate for a person's life, I understand that," Athena Schwantes said. "But it will soften the financial burden to some degree. It's a step forward in believing that some things are still just and fair.

About the Author

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