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At Least a Quarter of Ground Zero Firefighters Ill

By TINA KELLEY

A quarter of the 6,500 firefighters who have worked at ground zero after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, have respiratory ailments, and 100 to 200 are exhibiting serious symptoms that may allow them to retire on a disability pension, Fire Department officials said yesterday.

Representatives of the firefighters' union gave even higher estimates of the number who are ill. Thomas Manley, sergeant-at-arms and health and safety officer for the Uniformed Firefighters Association, which represents 9,100 firefighters, estimated that 4,000 firefighters are suffering from a persistent cough and that 400 to 500 may end up being forced to retire. Between 300 and 400 are on medical leave because they have a chronic cough, get winded very easily or are coughing up a lot of phlegm or a chalky substance, he said. None are hospitalized, though one or two were in September, he said.

About 1,100 firefighters have filed papers with the city indicating their intention to sue over inadequate protection from hazardous materials at the attack site, said Firefighter Palmer Doyle, who, with 500 others, filed one such notice last week.

Based on tests given to the 6,500 firefighters, department officials estimate that between 100 and 200 firefighters or officers are sick enough that the department medical board could declare that they are no longer physically able to fight fires. Those with that designation would then be eligible to apply for a disability pension, in which they would be paid three-quarters of their salary.

So far, Fire Department officials said, 15 firefighters who worked at ground zero have been designated as physically unable to fight fires. "We won't know for some time what the short- and long-term effects will be," said Francis X. Gribbon, a department spokesman. "But we are being very aggressive in not only treating people but in tracking their progress."

Besides those retiring for health reasons, many others are expected to retire because of the physical and emotional toll of the events of Sept. 11 or because of the amount of overtime they earned after the attack, said Capt. Peter L. Gorman, president of the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, which represents 2,500 lieutenants, captains and chiefs. "I think it'll be a troubling number of people combined retiring," he said. "We lost 3 percent of our whole membership that one day."

In recent years, about 500 firefighters or fire officers have retired annually, about half of whom go out on disability pensions. The increase in retirements related to health problems from ground zero could be devastating, said Tom Butler, a spokesman for Uniformed Firefighters Association. "I don't think you could know how long it would take to recover losing another sum of firefighters if that be the case, it would be so large," he said. "It could take two years to replace those numbers, to get the department back up to that manning level."

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