

# Man nearly loses a leg to flesh-eating bacteria

Area resident urges river safety after an aggressive infection

**CATHY DYSON**  
The Free Lance-Star

Wink Thompson carefully unwrapped the gauze from around his lower leg to show an open wound, a line of raw meat that

runs from halfway down his calf to below his ankle.

A year ago, Thompson was exposed to the flesh-eating bacteria, vibrio vulnificus, in a tributary of the Potomac River in Westmoreland County. The fast-moving and aggressive infection tore through his left leg, leaving dead or diseased skin, fat and muscle in its wake.

He needed four

“debridements,” procedures in which decimated tissue is

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**WATCH:** *Debbie Thompson discusses her husband's battle against a flesh-eating bacteria. Point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. [NEWSVU](#)*

## Bacteria

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removed so antibiotics and other fluids can get through to protect remaining skin and boost the healing process.

A medical provider showed Thompson's wife, Debbie, a photo of his leg after the first procedure — after warning her about how bad it was. The mangled leg looked more like a prop in a zombie movie than part of a living human and is not being published due to its graphic nature.

"It was like he went through some kind of meat grinder," she said.

While Wink Thompson said the leg is still ugly a year later, he didn't hesitate to uncover the wound for photographs. He wants to spread the message of what this dangerous bacteria can do.

"Anything to get the word out," he said. "I don't want anybody to go through what I went through."

### 'Touch and go'

Tall and thin, Thompson was an athlete in his younger days and a right-of-way agent who retired after almost 30 years with the Virginia Department of Transportation. Then, he worked for Spotsylvania County and private companies, and at age 80, is still doing parttime work, helping to secure utility easements.

A year ago this month, the Spotsylvania man was power-washing crab pots on the dock of his second home, in Glebe Harbor in Montross. It's on Weatherall Creek, which feeds into the Lower Machodoc Creek, and that empties into the Potomac.

He was using water from the house for the chore. He reached into the creek to pull out a pot, one at a time, and rinsed off the algae. Thompson never got into the stream.

Later that night, he had a pain in his left leg which he felt again at breakfast. He looked down and saw a round and red spot, "probably the size of a softball," and knew something was wrong.

The Thompsons left the Northern Neck and ended up in the emergency room at Mary Washington Hospital.

Tests showed he had been exposed to vibrio vulnificus, a species of bacteria that can cause life-threatening wounds, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. It estimates that about 80,000 people develop vibriosis, infections from the various types of vibrio bacteria, every year in the United States, and that about 100 of them die.

Vibrio bacteria are found naturally in salty and brackish water, which is a combination of fresh and salt water. The bacteria can enter the body through an open wound or by eating raw or undercooked seafood.

Not everyone who gets into the water with an open cut or eats raw oysters will develop an illness, but for those who do — because there may be other issues at



CATHY DYSON, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Wink Thompson points to the place on his leg where the wound initially started. He got sepsis after being exposed to a flesh-eating bacteria in a tributary of the Potomac River about one year ago.



PROVIDED BY DEBBIE THOMPSON

Thompson still crabs from his dock in Montross, much to his wife's dismay. She's concerned, even though he wears rubber boots, overalls and gloves so he won't be exposed to creek water.

play — the vibrio vulnificus infection can become serious quickly.

"About 1 in 5 people with this infection die, sometimes within a day or two of becoming ill," the CDC reports.

Debbie Thompson feared her husband might be one of them.

"It was touch and go for a while," she said. "We didn't know if he was gonna lose his limb or his life. (But) Wink is a strong person, physically and mentally, and he pushed himself and got through it."

### 'A tough case'

Doctors determined the vibrio had entered through a small scab on Thompson's ankle. He had torn his Achilles tendon on that leg three years earlier and needed several surgeries to try to repair it.

It probably wasn't the creek water alone that contained bacteria, said Dr. Norman Bernstein, an infectious disease doctor with Mary Washington Health-

care. He suspects there was bacterial residue in the crab pots, which got splashed around as Thompson did his power-washing — and that's probably what ended up making him sick.

Thompson's initial infection quickly turned to sepsis, and two trauma surgeons, Dr. Tedla Tessema and Dr. Corey Wright, and their team oversaw his case, both in the hospital and out. Wright's most recent follow-up with Thompson was on Friday.

At each team meeting early on, doctors discussed the possibility that Thompson might lose his leg. Not only did he have deadly bacteria running rampant, but Thompson also has thinning skin, both as a result of normal aging as well as blood thinners he takes for a heart condition. The blood thinners also cause more blood loss and can slow down the healing process, Wright said.

"It was a tough case, he had a lot going on," said Wright. "He had one of the



PETER CIHELKA, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Thompson removes the dressing from the wound caused by vibrio vulnificus bacteria. The Spotsylvania County man wants others to know about his case and to warn them to stay out of the water if they have an open wound.

more aggressive or exaggerated effects from it."

Within a few days of being exposed, Thompson needed the first surgery to remove dead and infected skin. The second procedure happened 30 hours later, Wright said, as doctors had to be aggressive to stay ahead of the fast-moving bacteria.

Each time, Thompson was placed under general anesthesia. He doesn't remember many details, but his wife reminded him of how horrible things were and the "excruciating pain" he endured.

In addition to removing dead skin, surgeons had to cover the gaping wound that stretched from below his knee to his ankle. They didn't want to take that much skin from elsewhere on his body and create additional wounds, Wright said, so they grafted pig skin onto his decimated leg at the same time as his own dead flesh was removed.

"It was a hard case, and we were very honest with him about the possibilities," Wright said. "Of course, he was nervous and scared, but he was in good spirits and trusted our assessments, and he was a model patient in that regard."

Wright said it took a team of surgeons, ICU doctors, infectious disease specialists, nursing staff and home-health nurses, who've visited Thompson every other day for almost a year, to move Thompson from the brink of death to where he's almost back to normal.

He's still working, he walks without a hitch and he still puts crab pots into the creek off his dock in Westmoreland County. The only difference is now he wears protective gear — rubber coveralls, boots and gloves — to keep the water off his body.

His wife wishes he'd drop the crabbing altogether.

"It irritates me and it frightens me," she said.

### 'A champion'

Wink Thompson contacted The Free Lance-Star about a story because he wants people to know the deadly bacteria exists. He's tried to talk with local health officials about posting information about vibrio vulnificus, and he'd like to see the state test regularly for it, just as it does other contaminants.

He'd also be happy if signs were posted at every public access, telling people, especially along the Potomac, about the dangers.

"He's kind of a champion for this process and awareness, trying to inform the public," Wright said.

While the bacteria occurs naturally, "vibrio vulnificus pathogens become more prevalent as Chesapeake Bay waters warm," according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration website. With the National Center for Coastal Ocean Science, it's put together a model that predicts the probability of vibrio vulnificus in the bay waters. It's available at [products.coastalscience.noaa.gov/vibrioforecast/vulnificus/chesapeake/default.aspx](https://products.coastalscience.noaa.gov/vibrioforecast/vulnificus/chesapeake/default.aspx).

Cases of vibrio infections must be reported to health departments in Virginia, and last year, the Rappahannock Area Health District, which includes Fredericksburg and the counties of Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania and Stafford, had three cases, said Allison Balmes-John, population health manager.

She said cases have remained steady the last five years and that none have been reported so far this year.

The health district stresses that people should not eat raw shellfish, especially oysters, and that they should avoid exposing open wounds to salty or brackish water. If they do and develop any signs of infection, they should visit a medical provider right away and mention they've been in the water, Balmes-John said.

Bernstein said patients regularly ask him if they should get into the water, even in a pool, when they have a cut or sore. He cautions against it.

"If you have an open wound, think twice before going into the water. Period," he said.

Wink Thompson has spent a good part of his life in the water, both at Fairview Beach in King George County and in the Northern Neck. His children and grandchildren are "water rats," just like he was at their age, but the experience of the last year has changed him.

"Right now, I'm not gonna get in the water, and I don't know that I ever will, even after I heal," he said. "But I'm making sure that all my guests don't go in the water if they have an open wound."

**Cathy Dyson:**

540/374-5425

[cdyson@freelancestar.com](mailto:cdyson@freelancestar.com)



TRISTAN LOREI PHOTOS, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Liam Jackson, 6, who has a terminal brain disease, gets a visit from his favorite superhero, the Grinch, amid Whoville decorations set up in his yard. His younger brother, Damon, is dressed as Max, the Grinch's dog.

# How the Grinch made a Stafford boy smile

Community recreates Seuss' Whoville for terminally ill child

**CATHY DYSON**  
The Free Lance-Star

No one's really sure how much Liam Jackson can see anymore because of the damage from a terminal brain disease.

But when the kindergartner and his family came home Friday afternoon and discovered their front yard in Falmouth had been turned into a replica of Whoville, Liam's younger siblings started chattering about a certain character with a pointed red hat and long green fur.

"The Grinch, the real Grinch? Is he here?" Liam asked while still in the vehicle. "I need to see him now."

His parents, Stephen and Madeline, held on to the 6-year-old's hand as he gingerly walked by the Whoville Post Office and



Liam Jackson checks out all the Whoville attractions in his yard but seemed to like going in and out of the door to the Grinch house the best.

repeatedly opened the door of the wooden cutout labeled as the Grinch's house.

More than 60 neighbors, staff from Falmouth Elementary School and members of the Staf-

ford Sheriff's Office, who showed up in a motorcade of motorcycles and cruisers with flashing blue lights, cheered and called out his name.

"We brought Whoville to

you, Liam," said Joni Moore Kanazawa, who directs the Fredericksburg-based organization Ellie's Elves. Named for Ellie Blaine, who was 2 when she died of cancer, the volunteer group supports other children facing terminal diseases and their families.

Kanazawa organized the event after discovering Liam's attachment to the Dr. Seuss character. While the rest of the world may find him as cuddly as a cactus, the Grinch is Liam's favorite superhero because he saves Christmas, his mother said.

"You can't convince him otherwise," she said. "The other day he told me, besides Jesus who's No. 1, the Grinch is No. 2."

Capt. Lee Peters is with the Stafford Sheriff's Office special forces and his work took on a slightly different twist Friday when he donned the Grinch costume. A board member with

# Whoville

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Ellie's Elves, he's played Mickey Mouse as well — and said he really was hoping for something more along the lines of a Marvel superhero.

But as Kanazawa stressed, the whole point of the event was to provide a happy experience for Liam and his family, and Peters was glad to oblige.

"It's all about making memories," Kanazawa said. "While he still has vision, we'll let Liam see this fuzzy character in colorful pants."

Liam started kindergarten last fall and absolutely loves school, said Sallie Burch, principal of Falmouth Elementary School. She was dressed in green and looked elflike as part of the Whoville display.

Liam's teacher, Audra Gulick, was at the Jackson home Friday as well, along with other staff from the nearby school. Gulick said Liam brightens her day.

"He's always like a light, a bright shining light," she said. "He's so easy to get along with and the kids love him."

In late fall, a bus driver noticed that Liam was having trouble getting up and down the bus steps. She mentioned it to the school nurse and Gulick, who talked with Liam's parents.

Tests began and the family got the news no parent wants, and it came on Liam's sixth birthday in January. He has a genetic condition called cerebral adrenoleukodystrophy, a disease in which the white matter of the brain is progressively damaged. Eventually, the nerves no longer relay information to the brain, causing all systems to shut down.

The Jacksons initially thought they'd have several more years, but Liam's condition is deteriorating so rapidly, doctors don't think he has that long, family members said. There is no treatment.

Ellie's Elves, along with the staff at Falmouth Elementary School, have helped with meals and expenses for the Jacksons. Liam is their oldest; Stephanie is 4, Damon turns 3 next month and they're expecting a fourth child in August.

The sudden news of Liam's illness has devastated the family, said Charlene Taylor, Madeline Jackson's sister. She's also a



CHLOE CUMMINGS PHOTOGRAPHY

The Jackson family — parents Madeline and Stephen and children Liam, Stephanie and Damon — are surrounded by the Grinch, members of Stafford Sheriff's Office, staff from Falmouth Elementary School, friends and neighbor.



TRISTAN LOREI, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Madeline Jackson takes the hand of her son, Liam, and shows him the Whoville decorations in their yard set up by volunteers from Ellie's Elves and others.



TRISTAN LOREI, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Richard Renninger (top) and other volunteers work to turn a Falmouth front yard into a scene from Whoville as a surprise for Liam Jackson, a kindergartner with a terminal brain disease.

hairdresser and one of her clients is Kimberly Anderson, a volunteer with Ellie's Elves.

As the two talked during a hair appointment, Taylor mentioned Liam's fondness for the Grinch. Anderson shared that detail with Kanazawa, and the wheels quickly began turning.

In 2015, Ellie's Elves created the Whoville scene for Ryan Mott, who had

brain cancer and was able to enjoy all things Grinch during his last Christmas. He died in 2016 at age 9.

Kanazawa didn't want the wooden cutouts of the Whoville School and other building facades to be put in storage, so the volunteer group has used them to decorate floats during Christmas parades. They also let Susan and Ralph Cooper add them to their Christmas decorations on

## HOW TO HELP

Staff at Falmouth Elementary School "have all just rallied around" Liam Jackson and his family, said Audra Gulick, Liam's teacher. He's a kindergartner with a genetic brain disease that's terminal.

The staff and Ellie's Elves, a volunteer group supporting the families of children with illnesses, are providing meals and raising funds. More information about the meal train is available at [mealtrain.com/trains/16gnn6](http://mealtrain.com/trains/16gnn6).

There's a Go Fund Me account to help with medical bills and other expenses at [gofundme.com](http://gofundme.com). Search for "Support for Liam with ALD."

There's also a Fiesta Fundraiser planned at 5:30 p.m. on March 31 at Stafford High School. Sallie Burch, the principal at Falmouth, planned to hold the event at her school but soon realized there wouldn't be enough parking.

The fundraiser will include live music, food and raffles. Staff members are putting together gift baskets as prizes.

Ramoth Church Road.

Kanazawa borrowed them back from the Coopers for Friday's decorating blitz. She asked Peters to help, then he asked a few fellow officers. He was expecting three or four but got more like 12.

"When word got around

it was for a child, people showed up," Peters said.

The Jacksons got permission from their homeowners association to keep the Christmas decorations for two weeks in late February and early March.

While Liam enjoyed the cutouts, the interaction with the Grinch was his favorite. Liam also was dressed in lime green Grinch pajamas and his little brother wore the costume of Max, the Grinch's dog. The Jacksons had hoped to dress Stephanie like Cindy Lou Who but couldn't find a costume so she wore something sparkly.

Liam giggled when the Grinch tucked Max under one arm and Stephanie under the other and pretended to run off with him. He grinned when the Grinch hid behind cutouts and peeked around the corner at him.

When the Grinch tickled Liam's cheek with his long fingers, Liam said: "He has soft hands." Someone else mentioned the Grinch needs to shave his knuckles and Liam responded in defense: "No he doesn't."

Liam's mother struggled to find the words to thank everyone who showed up in her yard. She was on the way back from visiting relatives when she got caught behind the police motorcade.

"I thought, that's for us," she said, holding back tears. "I appreciate everyone, I mean, it was so overwhelming to see. And Liam loved it."

In the words of Dr. Seuss, Kanazawa posted on Facebook after the event that "all our hearts grew three sizes today."

# Firefighters aim to stamp out occupational cancers

Diagnoses among area crew members reflect alarming trend

**CATHY DYSON**  
The Free Lance-Star

Fire engines, a ladder truck and ambulances from Fredericksburg to Fairfax County, along with about 50 of the people who operate them, gathered outside Stafford Hospital last week to support one of their own as he headed inside for cancer surgery.

Tyler Pennington, 30, is among a growing number of firefighters diagnosed with occupational cancer — the leading cause of death in the field, according to the International Association of Firefighters union. Cancer has been responsible for three of every four line-of-duty deaths since 2019 among union members alone, who make up only one-third of America's career firefighters.

Pennington had no clue about the “awesome and emotional



With wife Mary-Ellen at his side, Pennington reacts after seeing the crowd of colleagues and strangers alike who gathered to support him.

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# Cancer

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surprise” in store for him in the hospital parking lot the day of his procedure. Diagnosed with cancer a few days before Christmas, he had tried to keep his emotions in check for the sake of his family.

He and his wife, Mary-Ellen, have four children, ages 4 to 11, and live in Lake of the Woods. He works for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department.

His emotional barrier went up in smoke at the hospital rally, when he saw past and present co-workers along with firefighters and medics he didn't even know.

“I broke down,” Pennington said. “It was a really good feeling to see everyone.”

## More toxins

Firefighters point to several reasons for higher cancer rates, including the very turnout gear that repels water and oil and protects them from heat and smoke inhalation. A study released in August shows that the protective equipment contains per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, substances known as “forever chemicals” that have been linked to cancers and other diseases.

Then, there are the toxins emitted when synthetic materials and plastics burn, said Steve Weissman, a Spotsylvania County resident who directs the Virginia chapter of the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.

“Back in the day, buildings (and furniture) were constructed of legacy construction, wood, cotton, wools, and so forth. Now we're seeing a lot of plastics and synthetics and when they burn, they give off toxins like we've never seen before,” he said. “Really, our society's made of plastics.”

Weissman developed prostate cancer before he retired from the fire service in 2016, was treated successfully and remains cancer-free. Along with Ryan McGill, the local union's cancer reduction chairman, he's trying to get the word out to firefighters about ways to extinguish some of the risks they face.

The two also have lobbied the General Assembly to expand Workman's Compensation Insurance to cover more types of cancer.

“That's to protect our members and their families,” McGill said, “but we want to stop firefighters from even getting cancer in the first place.”

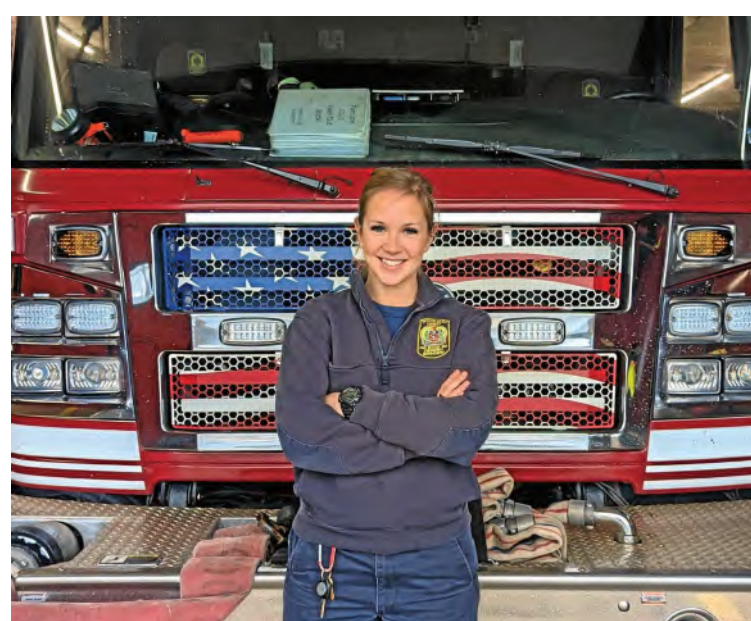
## Higher risks

Compared to the general population, firefighters face a 9% higher risk of developing cancer and a 14% higher risk of dying from it, according to the Centers for Disease Control and National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety. Those risks are spelled out on the Firefighter Cancer Support Network website.



PROVIDED PHOTOS

The family of Tyler Pennington (far right) at his Fairfax fire house. Shown with him are Anthony, Olivia, wife Mary-Ellen, Jaxon and Alex.



Elsa McCorkle, 28, is a firefighter and medic in Spotsylvania County. Last month, she had half her thyroid gland removed because of cancer.

## PENDING LEGISLATION

Professional firefighters in Virginia are lobbying the General Assembly to include more types of cancer coverage under Workmen's Compensation Insurance.

Currently, 10 types of cancer are covered under presumptive law for firefighters which means Workmen's Comp will cover their time off, medical bills and travel expenses to treatment – if they

meet requirements and their cases are approved. That's a lengthy process which can take more than a year, said Ryan McGill, a King George County resident and Fairfax County firefighter.

He's also a union representative of the International Association of Firefighters and has visited Richmond this month to bring attention to the risks firefighters face. He's asked local representatives to support a bill proposed by Del. Emily Brewer, R-Western Tidewater, that would add thyroid

and bladder cancer to the types of occupational cancers covered by Workmen's Comp.

“Firefighters across the Commonwealth put themselves at risk daily for potential toxic exposures in the name of safety,” Brewer said. “These exposures are tied to exponentially higher incidence rates of specific cancers. This is why ... the addition of these cancers is so vital to be added to the presumption law.”

On Friday, the measure, HB 1408,

was approved by a House Appropriations committee. If passed by the General Assembly, firefighters diagnosed with thyroid or bladder cancer after July 1, 2023, would be eligible for Workmen's Comp coverage.

Occupational cancers already covered for Virginia firefighters, both career and volunteer, include leukemia, pancreatic, prostate, rectal, throat, ovarian, breast, colon, brain and testicular.

—Cathy Dyson

A newer study released last year by the Center for Fire, Rescue & EMS Health Research in New York raised yet another alarm. Researchers studied medical records of more than 100,000 Florida firefighters over 34 years and found they have a 22% higher risk of developing thyroid cancer.

Weissman estimates about 10 firefighters in Virginia who've developed thyroid cancer have contacted him in the last year. Three are from the Fredericksburg area, including Pennington and Elsa McCorkle, a 28-year-old firefighter/medic with Spotsylvania County.

While she was caught off guard by the diagnosis, she wasn't totally shocked.

Cancer is “definitely a possibility, given everything we come in contact with,” she said.

The mentality around the firehouse, from what she's seen, tends to be not if, but “what kind of cancer are you going to have in your lifetime and are we gonna catch it early enough?” McCorkle said.

Pennington, on the other hand, didn't anticipate the c-word at all. He's been in the fire service since he was 16, running with the same company in Delaware as his father. In Virginia, he worked with the Fredericksburg Fire Department, then joined Fairfax County 2½ years ago.

During a routine physical in late 2021, a doctor discovered two growths on his thyroid and said to

keep an eye on them. A few months ago, he was eating dinner at the firehouse and felt pressure on his throat when he turned his head.

Then he choked on his food, and fellow firefighters jokingly asked if he needed saving.

Pennington, who's usually reluctant to visit a doctor, got checked out. One growth had doubled in size and plans were made to remove the entire gland.

He'll take medicine for the rest of his life to produce the hormones the thyroid normally would, to control his metabolism and body temperature.

McCorkle's cancer was on only one side of the thyroid, which is shaped like a butterfly. She had that lobe removed in mid-December and hopes pending tests show the remaining portion will provide what her body needs.

Both Pennington and McCorkle said the diagnosis doesn't change how they feel about being firefighters.

“I love this job, 100%,” he said. “If I'm going to do anything in this world, it's gonna be a fireman.”

He acknowledged he's going to check more things off his bucket list because this “goes to show you never know.” McCorkle plans to focus on staying healthy.

“Honestly, the big thing I do personally is watch my diet and make sure I'm trying to get enough sleep and exercise because (those) are huge impactors to overall health and cancer recovery,” she

said. “Control the things you can.”

## More prevention

In recent years, departments have added decontamination units that accompany fire apparatus to the scene, and in these units, firefighters are basically hosed off when they're done, while still wearing their turnout gear.

That on-scene decontamination with soap and water can remove up to 85% of toxins, Weissman said. Getting the gear cleaned, either by a professional company or in an in-house washing machine called an extractor, can take away up to 99% of possible cancer-causing chemicals, he said.

But as with most things, prevention costs money. Firefighters would need two sets of turnout gear in order to get each set cleaned after exposure. One set costs about \$4,000, Weissman said. The extractors are about \$9,000 each.

He estimates that less than half of fire departments statewide provide two sets of gear.

“Most metropolitan areas comply with that,” Weissman said. “The issue is a lot of rural volunteer organizations can't afford it.”

Then, there's the firehouse culture itself, “rooted in hundreds of years of tradition and the way we've always done things,” McGill said. “Now we have to change the culture of an industry that's been around forever.”

Changes include making sure turnout gear is stored in ventilated

areas, not where firefighters live, eat and sleep, because what toxins remain maybe be “off-gassing” or sending out toxins, the firefighters said.

There are educational campaigns about occupational cancer as well as information about help provided to firefighters who've been diagnosed with one type of disease. That ranges from what to ask physicians to how they can get their wills, medical directives and general house in order, Weissman said.

There's also a campaign to have manufacturers develop gear that doesn't contain carcinogens. While firefighters' breathing masks protect airways, there are other areas of gear that allow chemicals to get through and “they're dermally absorbed through our skin and that's the primary route of exposure,” McGill said.

Some localities offer diagnostic screening for firefighters as Spotsylvania's union recently did. McCorkle's cancer already had been diagnosed but she appreciates the potentially lifesaving value of such scans.

“Let's make sure we're on top of catching it, as early as possible,” she said. “That's probably one of the biggest impactors on survival. Catch it early and it doesn't impact their quality of life and ability to return to work. That is a huge help.”

Cathy Dyson: 540/374-5425  
cdyson@freelancestar.com