# Mollie’s Fund Partners to Prevent Skin Cancers Among Firefighters

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September 23, 2022 By Melanoma Research Alliance

Every day firefighters put their own safety on the line to protect the lives and property of others. It’s a tough job that puts those who do it at increased risk for burns, smoke inhalation, and other injuries. Recent research suggests that firefighters are also at increased risk of developing skin cancer, including melanoma, as a likely result of the numerous chemicals that they are exposed to on the job. The Mollie Biggane Melanoma Foundation, better known as Mollie’s Fund, is working to address this disparity and keep these public servants healthy and skin cancer free.

## Firefighters and Increased-Risk of Cancer

Firefighting has long been linked to cancer, especially mesothelioma and other cancers of the lungs. A multi-year study launched by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in 2010 found that not only are firefighters more at risk for developing many cancers, they also are younger when diagnosed. According to the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), cancer is the leading cause of death among firefighters and accounts for more than 65% of line-of-duty deaths they record each year.

In 2017, University of Miami researcher Dr. Alberto Caban-Martinez and his team published an analysis of skin cancer history, skin cancer screening, and sun protection habits among 2400 active Florida firefighters. The study, published in JAMA Dermatology, found that 0.7% of the firefighters surveyed had been diagnosed with melanoma and 3.5% had a history of nonmelanoma skin cancers. When compared against rates of melanoma and nonmelanoma skin cancers in Florida, these rates are far higher. The authors also found that firefighters were more likely to be diagnosed with melanoma at earlier ages than the general U.S. population (42 years old compared to 64).

Scientists do not fully understand why firefighters are at increased risk for developing skin cancer, but believe it to be associated with exposure to toxic and cancer-causing chemicals that are released during a fire.

## Mollie’s Fund: From Grief to Action

The Mollie Biggane Melanoma Foundation, led by Jack and Maggie Biggane, describes itself as a “team of crusaders” on a mission to increase awareness of melanoma and the importance of sun safety. The foundation’s namesake, Mollie, tragically passed away six months after finding a bleeding mole on her thigh – despite aggressive treatment – at just 20-years old.

“If we could prevent other families from having such a tragic loss, that’s what we wanted to do,” said Maggie.

The foundation has reached millions of people through its award-winning PSAs, billboards, educational resources, and events. Partnering with the creative team at advertising’s Area 23, they have created multiple award-winning, innovative and edgy campaigns to highlight the importance of sun safety and early detection.

This summer, Mollie’s Fund targeted over 3 million NY and NJ beachgoers with a 30’ x 70’ aerial billboard, “Odds of a shark attack, 1 in 5,000,000. Odds of developing skin cancer 1 in 5”. Summer shark activity in the Northeast has been catching a lot of attention this summer but the probability of getting bitten by a shark is very small compared to the reality of developing skin cancer.

“As a result of Covid-missed skin cancer checks and global temperatures on the rise, we are going to encounter more melanoma and skin cancer diagnoses so prevention is more important than ever,” said Jack Biggane. “Education is the most important tool in our war against skin cancer. With our partners in the melanoma community, we strive in our daughter’s name to make a difference with this disease.”

## Mollies Fund & FDNY Join Forces

In June 2021, Frank Leeb, Chief of the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) Fire Academy, reached out to Mollie’s Fund after hearing Jack and Maggie speak about the foundation’s impact on a local radio program.

He was impressed with their approach and was eager to discuss how they could work together to bring skin cancer awareness to incoming and veteran FDNY firefighters. The new partners quickly began to plan in earnest, and just over a month later, Mollie’s Fund held a kickoff event at FDNY’s Fire Training Academy on Randall’s Island.

During the event, New York University dermatologist Dr. Elizabeth Hale taught trainees about skin cancer, how to identify its signs and symptoms, and stressed the importance of sun safety and prevention.

Jack and Maggie’s daughter, Cara Biggane – a NYC public school teacher – shared the story of her sister’s untimely passing due to melanoma. “Just like fire safety, we believe in the importance of

prevention."

"The FDNY Fire Academy is all about making sure our fire fighters are the best trained and we believe skin cancer prevention is an important self-help tool," said Chief Leeb. "We want our people to understand their risk and take proactive steps to mitigate this risk."

"We are thrilled to partner with Mollie's Fund," said Chief Leeb. "Together, we will save lives and bring greater awareness of skin cancer."

## The Expanding the Program

Today, just over one year later, Mollie's Fund has collaborated with the New Jersey Commission of Fire Academies, the Connecticut Fire Academy and Fort Worth Fire Academy to launch similar programs. They are currently in discussions with fire fighter training programs in Georgia and Philadelphia to support those communities.

As the program expands, Mollie's Fund has created a turnkey approach that allows new partners to get up and running as quickly as possible. Dr. Hale's lecture has been converted into an online learning module that can be easily incorporated into existing training programs. In addition, Mollie's Fund also provides customized posters and free sunscreen dispensers to make sun safety top of mind.

"In many ways, as the largest fire department in the United States, FDNY is a role model for what a fire department should look like and how it should be trained," said Jack Biggane. "They've also been instrumental in helping us get the word out about this lifesaving program made for our public servants."

This story was published by Melanoma Research Alliance on September 8, 2022. It is republished with permission.

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