

Speaker Jose Oliva draws fire as firefighter cancer insurance bill gets bottled up in House

[Jeffrey Schweers](#), Tallahassee Democrat Published 12:04 p.m. ET April 15, 2019 | Updated 2:30 p.m. ET April 15, 2019

A bill requiring local governments to provide insurance and death benefits to firefighters with cancer would cost less than \$5 million across a \$90 billion state budget, and it has the support of the Senate and more than two-thirds of the House membership.

Those House sponsors cover the entire political spectrum, from the most ardent leftist to the staunchest conservative, from the Panhandle to the Florida Keys, and literally from Alexander to Zika.

And one of its primary cosponsors is Rep. Chris Latvala, R-Clearwater, a member of the House Speaker's leadership team and chairman of the Pre K-12 appropriations subcommittee.

But the bill isn't moving.

House Speaker Jose Oliva, R-Miami Lakes, said it hasn't had a committee hearing because he's concerned about the cost to local governments.

"This is an issue best dealt with at the county level as each department faces varying levels of danger and exposure and counties are best equipped to tailor benefits to need within available resources," Oliva has said previously.

But rumors around the fire station are that his motives have more to do with politics than policy, something Oliva strongly rejects. Firefighters said he's got a beef with Miami-Dade County firefighters, particularly over the fact they put up one of their own, Coral Gables firefighter David Perez, as a Democrat against Oliva's friend and political ally Manny Diaz in the 2018 Senate race.



House Speaker Jose Oliva speaks during the opening day of session for the Florida Legislature Tuesday, March 5, 2019. (Photo: Tori Schneider/Tallahassee Democrat)

Diaz eventually won, but Oliva still carries a grudge, sources said.

A close Oliva ally, Frank Artiles, who resigned from the Senate in 2016 for racial slurs made at a Tallahassee bar and is soon to be reinstated as a lobbyist, posted on Perez's Facebook page that the bill was doomed, according to the Political Cortadito website written by former Miami Herald reporter Elaine De Valle.

"There is no political motivation attached," Oliva said in a text message to the Democrat. "The bill has struggled for several years prior to the last election. It has been opposed by local governments as well.

"The personal attacks and false accusations are unfortunate and not helpful. The real culprit is the cost of healthcare overall, which is why it is my top priority."

The House has a very public record of support for firefighters, Oliva said. He even suggested for the first time that a compromise is possible.

"Session is not yet over," Oliva said, suggesting even a possible floor vote. "With some adjustments I believe it is possible."

The political feud was alluded to last week during a Senate committee hearing on the bill by Ashley Rabon, the widow of a Jacksonville Beach firefighter who lost his battle with cancer in 2018.



Ashley Rabon, widow of Jacksonville Beach firefighter Ronald Rabon, testifies before Senate committee last week in favor of bill giving firefighters expanded health coverage and death benefits. (Photo: The Florida Channel)

“These men and women are not pawns in Oliva’s political party,” Rabon said. “They cannot wait out a stalemate to see which side will be declared winner. They are real people with real illnesses and are really dying and they deserve our support.”

Jazz Zombo, a firefighter with Seminole County Local 3254 and two-time cancer survivor, was stunned when a lawmaker told her the bill was dead during the first week of session when firefighters rallied at the Capitol with a display of 500 pairs of boots.

"We were told that before we did the boot display," Zombo said. "One of the representatives said this bill is dead. I thought, 'Are you kidding me?'"

Firefighters are frustrated and mystified by Oliva’s refusal to hear them.

“He has some kind of personal problem with fire departments,” said Jay Post, a retired Brevard County firefighter and cancer survivor who has lobbied the Legislature for years to expand insurance protection for firefighters who get cancer. “He refuses to speak with any of our representatives, not even the president of the firefighters association.”



Jay Post, a former Brevard County Fire Department firefighter who is battling throat cancer, places a card honoring a fellow firefighter who lost their battle to cancer. Firefighters and their families from around the state create a display at the Capitol of 500 pairs of boots in honor of firefighters who lost their battle or are battling with cancer caused from smoke inhalation and carcinogens Thursday, March 7, 2019. The state of Florida is one of five states in the country that does not have a bill acknowledging cancer is a job-related illness. (Photo: Alicia Devine/Tallahassee Democrat)

Jim Tolley, president of the Florida Professional Firefighters, emailed the speaker in February, saying he understood Oliva had concerns with the bill and wanted to discuss ways to address those concerns.

“We never got a meeting in three-and-a-half months,” Tolley said. “It’s almost unheard of.”

Tolley said he understood the speaker's comments that it could be better controlled at the local level, but local governments cannot change the Florida Retirement System to provide death benefits.

Firefighters had even asked Rep. Scott Plakon, who chairs the Oversight, Transparency and Public Management Subcommittee, which would have been the first stop for the bill, to hold a hearing.

“It’s unheard of to have so many co-sponsors on the bill and not have it heard,” Tolley said.

Meanwhile, the Senate version has cleared all three of its committee assignments and is moving to a floor vote.



Jay Post, a former firefighter who is now battling throat cancer, takes in the final display created that morning. Firefighters and their families from around the state create a display at the Capitol of 500 pairs of boots in honor of firefighters who lost their battle or are battling with cancer caused from smoke inhalation and carcinogens Thursday, March 7, 2019. The state of Florida is one of five states in the country that does not have a bill acknowledging cancer is a job-related illness. (Photo: Alicia Devine/Tallahassee Democrat)

The bill would require city and county governments to provide full cancer coverage, as well as disability and death benefits to firefighters who are non-smokers and on the job full-time for at least five years.

Instead of pursuing workers' comp claims, firefighters would be entitled to cancer treatment and get one-time payment of \$25,000, which can be used to help pay for out-of-pocket healthcare costs.

An actuarial study conducted by Senate staff showed the annual cost to be \$1 million for the state, and \$3.28 million for all counties.

“There have been questions and concerns about the devastating impact this would have,” said Miami Republican Anitere Flores, the bill’s Senate sponsor. “This shows that number is very manageable.”

Evan Jenne, a Broward County Democrat and ranking member of the commerce committee, said he’s also surprised a bill with so many sponsors hasn’t gotten a hearing.



Ashley Rabon, a mother of three who lost her husband, Captain Ronald Rabon with the Jacksonville Beach Fire Department who lost his battle with appendix cancer, places a card honoring him in a pair of boots. Firefighters and their families from around the state create a display at the Capitol of 500 pairs of boots in honor of firefighters who lost their battle or are battling with cancer caused from smoke inhalation and carcinogens Thursday, March 7, 2019. The state of Florida is one of five states in the country that does not have a bill acknowledging cancer is a job-related illness. (Photo: Alicia Devine/Tallahassee Democrat)

“With over 80 sponsors we’ve got a super-majority that would like to see this pass,” Jenne said. “It doesn’t make a lot of sense why it didn’t get a hearing. I can’t imagine why anyone wouldn’t want to give cancer benefits to firefighters. It flies in the face of decency.”

Jenne said he would gladly give up a \$1 million appropriation for a fire truck in his district to help cover the cost of the insurance, and he’s sure other members would be willing to do likewise.

“Anyone that says it’s the cost, I don’t buy that,” Jenne said. “I can think of no good reason not to pass this bill.”

Contact Schweers at jschweers@gannett.com. Follow him on Twitter @jeffschweers.