

A firefighter's widow has exposed a cruel gap in NSW compensation laws that left her husband feeling abandoned in the final days of his battle with lung cancer.



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2 min read

September 27, 2025 - 4:42PM



Cathy McQuade says her husband Andrew McQuade, a retired firefighter, died from lung cancer, which is recognised as work-related in all Australian states except NSW.

The grieving widow of a firefighter who died of lung cancer just 12 months into retirement has pleaded with the Minns government to protect its frontline workers, claiming her husband was “abandoned”.

Cathy and Andrew McQuade were looking forward to spending time with their grandkids, joining community groups and living out their “beautiful marriage” after two busy careers.

But now Ms McQuade sits alone in an empty house.

Andrew died from lung cancer aged just 61 last May after working for decades at Fire and Rescue NSW, including his last role as a hazardous materials officer.



Cathy McQuade says NSW lags behind other states in protecting its firefighters. Picture: Shelley Brauer

The father-of-two attended hundreds of fires during his career, breathing in smoke and dangerous chemicals.

But, on his deathbed, Andrew was denied compensation because lung cancer is covered as a work-related illness for firefighters in other states – but not in NSW.

“Andrew felt really abandoned by the fire service because they covered some cancers but not others and we were fighting for his life,” Ms McQuade said.

“He breathed in that much crap over the years ... but he said to me before he died: ‘Do you realise if I was sitting in another hospital in another state I’d be covered, but I’m not’,” she said.



Andrew McQuade felt abandoned by the NSW government. Picture: Supplied.



Andrew McQuade's death spotlights a gap in the cancer cover for NSW firefighters. Picture: Supplied.

There are 12 cancers common among firefighters that are recognised in NSW under presumptive cancer laws, which make it easier and faster for people to access compensation without having to prove the illness was caused by work.

But nine additional cancers, including oesophageal, lung and ovarian cancer are not covered, despite being recognised at the federal level and in other states and the ACT.

NSW firefighters are some of the last in the country that are not fully covered, more than a decade after a landmark study from Monash University found cancer rates in full-time firefighters were significantly higher than in the general public, particularly for workers with more than 20 years of experience.



A scene from Cathy McQuade's home that pays homage to her late husband, Andrew McQuade's many decades as a firefighter. Picture: Shelley Brauer

The research found cancer rates were linked to exposure to toxic chemicals while fighting blazes and the use of retardant foam used to suppress fires, which contains PFAS "forever chemicals".

Cardiologist Dr Ross Walker said it was a "no-brainer" to cover the full list of cancers.

"Logically, the more you're exposed to toxic chemicals that your lungs are not used to, the greater the risk of lung cancer, stroke and heart disease," Dr Walker said.

Despite working as a part-time firefighter in his 20s, Premier Chris Minns and his government have been accused by the Opposition of stalling a new bill that would cover nine additional cancers.

In turn, a government spokesman said Labor would introduce the new laws at the next parliamentary sitting before slamming the Opposition for delaying broader workers compensation reforms which were "needed" to make the scheme sustainable first.

But Ms McQuade urged the government to "stop dragging its feet". She spent \$60,000 to try and keep her husband alive. "My life is just absolutely shattered, everything we wanted to do and hoped to do is gone ... but unless we stand up things are never going to change," she said.