

Insurance Times: NY workers comp board handles 9/11 claims

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BOSTON — In 1995, regulators with New York Workers Compensation Board didn't even have a computer.

Today, they have a modernized office that's been vital to handle claims relating to the Sept. 11 World Trade Center terrorist attacks.

The board has handled 6,200 claims relating to the attacks to date — 2,200 of which were fatalities.

Usually, that number reaches about 400 death cases for the entire year, says board Chairman Robert Snashall. "We received over five years of death cases in one day from one event," he said.

Snashall offered updated Sept. 11 statistics during the July 11 session of the National Conference of Insurance Legislators' meeting, held in Boston.

He said that the Workers Compensation Board was able to meet the extra challenges of the 9/11 aftermath, in part because of some pragmatic efforts beginning in 1996 to modernize with new technology, funding and reforms beginning — all thanks to Gov. George Pataki and legislators.

"We had a bureaucracy that was not able to meet the needs of the injured workers around the State of New York," he said. "If we had not had the investments, we would not have been able to meet the challenges of 9/11. We would not have been able to process in a timely fashion those 6,200 claims."

Today the office has an "award winning technology system ... we use to deliver better services to our constituents," Snashall said.

Of the 2,200 death cases, "one percent were contested by the insurance community. 99 percent ... were accepted without any controversy," he noted.

But that doesn't mean that the Workers Compensation Board hasn't met with some unusual challenges, Snashall said, such as the man who had two wives and now both families are claiming benefits.

Out of the 4,000 remaining World Trade Center cases, many involve "serious physical injury." But about half "have some element of stress associated with it." Of the stress cases, he said, about 25 percent have been challenged by insurers.

Snashall said the World Trade Center workers compensation cases have been covered even though terrorism was the cause of the work-related injuries. New York law, he said, has ensured coverage in the wake of terrorism since the 1920s.

"The statute," he said, "does not exclude injuries or death related to terror."

A bigger challenge, he said, is some reinsurers are reluctant "to now offer reinsurance or excess insurance to certain employers with high levels of employee concentration in certain landmark buildings in urban areas."