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R. Karl Aumann

Chairman Maryland Workers’ Compensation Commission

R. Karl Aumann was selected in the Spring of 2006 by Governor Robert Ehrlich to the position of Chairman of the Maryland Workers’ Compensation Commission. The *With IWIF* team recently sat down with Chairman Aumann to get his viewpoints on a number of issues in the workers’ compensation system.

Q: After your initial months as Chairman of the Commission, what is your overall impression of the current Workers’ Compensation system in Maryland?

I have had the opportunity to meet with and hear from a number of my fellow State Commissioners and I am proud to say Maryland has one of the best workers’ compensation systems in the country. It’s doing the job it was created to do, one that takes care of the injured worker while also protecting the employers in the state.

I knew how collegial the workers’ compensation community was, but there’s a difference between knowing it and experiencing it. There is a civility that is totally absent in other sectors of legal practice. Here you don’t see a lot of what lawyers call sandbagging. There is a mutual and professional respect of all parties involved. It’s what helps to make us run smoothly and efficiently.

Q: What do you feel you bring to the position as Chairman of the Workers’ Compensation Commission?

I’m a hands-on manager and people person. I feel it’s important for me to have claim dockets and hear claims as well. I also take the public service aspect of my job very seriously. I fully believe we’re here for all the people, here for the claimant and the employer. I also miss the practice of law. As the former Secretary of State, I’m glad to be able to step back into an agency that contains aspects of the legal practice. I also want to take this opportunity to praise the former Chairman, Thomas P. O’Reilly. He took the commission from a paper heavy organization to the cutting edge with technology. The Commission has no paper files, we store and retrieve all documents electronically. This was just one of the initiatives led by Tom O’Reilly.

Q: What do you want Maryland’s employers to know about the Commission that you feel they are not aware of?

We have so many unsung heroes in this agency. The Commission has about 130 employees involved in handling claims and staffing hearings throughout the state. They are a dedicated group of professionals doing a great job for the citizens of Maryland. Folks should know that, for the various hearing sites around the State we send one commissioner,

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three employees, one security person, and one court reporter to each off-site hearing. Each of the 10 commissioners has about 8-9 dockets and we service about 1,000 claims per week.

Q: There was talk of Annapolis getting a hearing site again. Do you anticipate that happening or any other hearing sites being created?

I do not foresee adding an Annapolis regional site in the near future because that would draw cases from LaPlata, which already has the lightest caseload in the state. By contrast, the Beltsville regional site already out draws Baltimore City in number of hearing cases. There is also the expense of opening and staffing another hearing site.

Q: As Chairman, what are your goals and vision for Maryland’s WCC going forward and for Maryland’s workers’ compensation system in general?

I would like to see more on-line filing of the Employer’s First Report of Injury as well as the employee claim forms. Filing electronically really streamlines and expedites the claims process. The commission and I also have a strong interest in “Employer non-compliance.” It is a big concern of mine. We have people who are injured on the job and then they find out their employer does not have insurance coverage. The number of “Show-cause hearings” to allow employers to explain their non-compliance with obtaining insurance has grown to about 30 cases per month. The cost of taking care of these injured workers then falls to the uninsured employers fund, which all Maryland businesses subsidize. This problem is growing nationwide; other states are trying different means of enforcing compliance, including fines and business shutdowns.

I also want to remind everyone involved – employers, labor and regulatory – that we need to do a better job of teaching and providing basic safety training to our Spanish speaking workers in Maryland. So many of the injury claims we see at the commission involving non-English speaking workers are the result of not understanding or not following basic safety precautions while working. ■



About the Maryland Workers' Compensation Commission

The mission of the Maryland Workers' Compensation Commission is to secure the equitable and timely administration of the Maryland Workers' Compensation Law on behalf of its customers – injured workers and their employers, by providing an efficient and effective forum for the resolution of individual claims.

Maryland's Workers' Compensation Commission hears and tries thousands of contested cases annually, including several thousand involving IWIF. Such hearings help the Commission determine how much claimants should receive for lost wages and expenses resulting from job-related injuries or illnesses.

Headed by Chairman R. Karl Aumann, the 10 members of the Commission, all lawyers, are appointed to 12-year terms by the Governor with the advice and consent of the state Senate. The workload of this agency and its staff of about 130 professionals has grown steadily. Last year it scheduled 44,282 hearings, 707 more than in the previous year.

A constantly developing automation system helps the Commission meet a monumental record-tracking challenge, as reflected in this report of its activity:

- received 27,122 claims last year and issued 34,922 orders, 97% of them within 30 days of hearing.
- received more than 400,000 forms annually and scanned nearly 2,000,000 pages into its data system.
- sent out some 725,000 pieces of mail annually.
- received an average of 9,000 calls each month

Those serving with Chairman Aumann are Commissioners David O. Godwin, Jr.; Jeffrey C. Herwig; Shalisha Hines Ivy; Richard T. LaFata; Kenneth G. Macleay; Cynthia S. Miraglia; Maureen Quinn; Lauren Sfekas; and John R. Webster, Jr.

The Maryland Workers' Compensation Commission

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