

Texas State Fire Marshal's Office

Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report

October 2023

TDI | Texas Department
of Insurance





Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report

Fiscal year 2023

by the

Texas State Fire Marshal's Office

Submitted October 2023

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debra Knight".

Debra Knight
State Fire Marshal
Texas Department of Insurance

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Overview

[State law](#) requires the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) to investigate firefighter fatalities that happen in the line of duty or in connection with an on-duty incident. It must investigate the circumstances of the death, including any contributing factors.

The term "firefighter" means anyone who performs fire suppression duties for a governmental entity or volunteer fire department.

Background

The Texas Commission on Fire Protection sets the criteria for gathering and analyzing firefighter injury data. They also produce an [annual report](#) of all firefighter injuries, exposures, and cancer diagnoses. SFMO doesn't investigate cancer or COVID-19 deaths. These deaths are documented by other entities.

The State Fire Marshal's Office works with various organizations and agencies to provide guidance and review of investigations, including:

- State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association
- Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service
- Texas A&M Forest Service
- Texas Chapter, International Association of Arson Investigations
- Texas Commission on Fire Protection
- Texas Fire Chiefs Association
- Texas Fire Marshals Association
- Texas State Association of Fire Fighters
- Texas metropolitan fire departments (including Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio)

Investigations

SFMO investigated 10 firefighter fatality incidents that resulted in 11 deaths.

Capt. Samuel Stacks, 49 years old

Marble Falls Fire Department

September 20, 2022 | On-duty medical event

On September 20, 2022, Capt. Stacks became ill while on duty. He left the fire station and went home.

The next day, Capt. Stacks was taken to a hospital in Marble Falls. He was then transported by helicopter to Baylor Scott & White Medical Center - Round Rock, where he died on September 22, 2022.



Capt. Charles Krampota, 60 years old

Alvin Volunteer Fire Department

September 23, 2022 | On-duty medical event

On September 23, 2022, the Alvin Volunteer Fire Department was dispatched to a mobile home fire.

Capt. Krampota was actively involved in extinguishing the fire. After being cleared from the scene, Capt. Krampota returned home.

Hours later, a family member found Capt. Krampota dead in his home.



Chief Curtis Brown, 51 years old
Firefighter Brendan Torres, 19 years old

Dalhart Volunteer Fire Department

October 4, 2022 | On-duty motor vehicle accident

On October 4, 2022, Chief Brown and Firefighter Torres were involved in a collision while returning from a call in a fire department vehicle.

A semi-truck was trying to pass another vehicle when it crashed head-on into the fire department vehicle.

Chief Brown and Firefighter Torres were pronounced dead at the scene.



Firefighter Andrew Jefferies, 40 years old

Galveston Fire Department

January 31, 2023 | On-duty medical event

On January 31, 2023, Firefighter Jefferies appeared disoriented in the men's bunkroom of the fire station.

Firefighter Jefferies became unresponsive.

Galveston Fire Department and Galveston County EMS began advanced life support and transported him to the hospital.

Firefighter Jefferies died on February 7, 2023.



Engineer William “Bill” Fore, 38 years old

Brady Fire Department

March 8, 2023 | On-duty suicide

On March 8, 2023, Brady firefighters noticed Engineer Fore missed roll call. They found him in his personal vehicle in the fire department parking lot, severely injured from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

He was transported to Shannon Medical Center in San Angelo, where he died the next day.



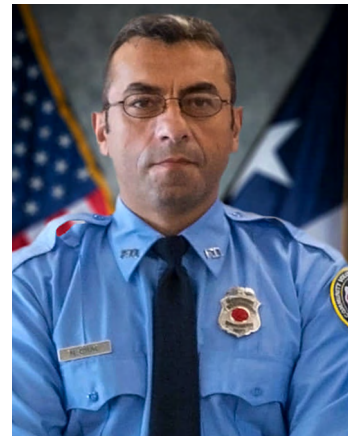
Firefighter Nahit Oral, 49 years old

Community Volunteer Fire Department

March 9, 2023 | On-duty medical event

On March 9, 2023, Firefighter Oral died after suffering a medical emergency following a department training event. He was found unresponsive in the front seat of his personal vehicle in a public parking lot.

Firefighter Oral had just completed a physical agility test at the Community Volunteer Fire Department training facility.



Firefighter Edward Hykel Jr., 60 years old

West Volunteer Fire Department

March 28, 2023 | On-duty motor vehicle accident

On March 28, 2023, the West Volunteer Fire Department was dispatched to a vehicle fire on Interstate 35 near mile marker 354.

A West fire engine and two Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) patrol vehicles were used to block traffic while waiting for a tow truck.

An 18-wheeler disregarded the traffic control devices and struck the fire engine and patrol vehicles. Firefighter Hykel and two DPS troopers were struck during the collision.

Firefighter Hykel and the DPS troopers were transported to the hospital. Firefighter Hykel was pronounced dead at the hospital. The two troopers had nonlife-threatening injuries.



Firefighter Dan Wright Jr., 71 years old

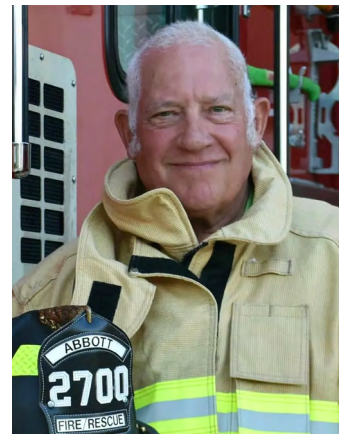
Abbott Volunteer Fire Department

April 14, 2023 | On-duty motor vehicle accident

On April 14, 2023, the Abbott Volunteer Fire Department responded to a major accident call on Interstate 35.

When crews arrived, they discovered it was a stranded driver. The fire crew stayed to help with traffic control.

As they were repositioning, Firefighter Wright was struck by the fire truck as it backed up. He was flown to a Waco hospital, where he later died.



Lt. Richard Hempel, 53 years old

Groesbeck Volunteer Fire Department

May 8, 2023 | On-duty medical event

On May 8, 2023, the Groesbeck Volunteer Fire Department responded to an EMS call at a residence.

The next day, Lt. Hempel began to feel ill. He was found unresponsive at his home.

He was transported to a local hospital, where he was pronounced dead.



Firefighter Evan Brown, 19 years old

Honey Grove Volunteer Fire Department

July 9, 2023 | On-duty motor vehicle accident

On July 9, 2023, Firefighter Brown and another firefighter with the Honey Grove Volunteer Fire Department were responding to an emergency call in his personal vehicle when they struck a cow in the roadway.

The pickup truck rolled, ejecting Firefighter Brown. He was transported to a Dallas-area hospital. The other firefighter had minor injuries.

Firefighter Brown died in the hospital on July 29, 2023.



Prosecution for 2017 firefighter fatality

On May 18, 2017, the San Antonio Fire Department responded to a structure fire on Ingram Road in San Antonio.

San Antonio Fire Department Ladder 35 and Engine 35 arrived on the scene and saw smoke inside the Spartan Boxing Gym. Firefighters made forcible entry through the front doors. The Engine 35 crew was assigned suppression, and Ladder 35 Firefighters Scott Deem and Brad Phipps were assigned to search the gym.

During their search, Firefighters Deem and Phipps found the fire and called for a hose line. Conditions rapidly worsened, and Firefighters Deem and Phipps declared a "mayday." Efforts shifted to focus on their rescue. Several Rapid Intervention Teams (RIT) went inside to find the firefighters.

Two firefighters were injured, and one firefighter died:

- Firefighter Robert Vasquez became separated from his RIT while searching for Firefighters Phipps and Deem but was found and extracted. Firefighter Vasquez suffered minor injuries. He was transported to the hospital and later released.
- A RIT found and extracted Firefighter Phipps. He sustained life-threatening injuries and was transported to Brooke Army Medical Center. He was released to continue recovery at home.
- Attempts to contact Firefighter Deem or hear his PASS device were unsuccessful. As conditions worsened, rescue operations were suspended. Defensive tactics were used to suppress the fire. After the fire was suppressed, a secondary search was conducted, and Firefighter Deem was found deceased in the gym.

The SFMO firefighter fatality coordinator was notified of the incident and responded with a team of investigators.

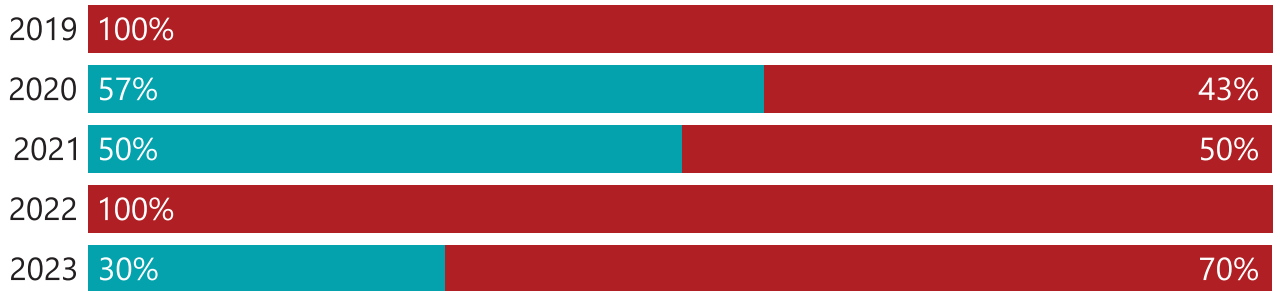
A joint investigation by the SFMO, San Antonio Arson Bureau, and the San Antonio Police Department resulted in the arrest of the owner of the Spartan Box Gym, Emond Johnson. A Bexar County grand jury indicted the owner for arson resulting in the death of a firefighter and injuries to other firefighters.

On July 19, 2023, Emond Johnson was sentenced to 30 years in prison for murder and arson.

On-duty firefighter fatality investigation statistics

The [U.S. Fire Administration](#) tracks and collects on-duty firefighter deaths in the United States. Their data and reports are published by the calendar year. In 2022, there were 88 firefighter fatalities (non-COVID-19 related) in the country.

SFMO on-duty firefighter fatality investigations by classification



Fiscal year	■ Paid	■ Volunteer
2019	-	1
2020	4	3
2021	2	2
2022	-	3
2023	3	7

Types of SFMO on-duty firefighter fatality investigations, FY 2019 - FY 2023



■ Medical event	11	44%
■ Motor vehicle accident	12	48%
■ Other	2	8%

Firefighter fatality prevention strategies

SFMO encourages using proven strategies developed by both SFMO and nationally recognized organizations to reduce firefighter fatalities. Our office:

- Publishes investigation reports, shares information with the firefighter fatality investigation panel, and makes presentations at fire service conferences to share lessons learned from investigations.
- Sends fatality investigation reports to affected fire departments and posts them on the [SFMO website](#).
- Visits fire departments that had a line-of-duty death to see improvements made since the incident.

Departments are encouraged to:

- Participate in Firefighter Safety Stand Down, sponsored by the [International Association of Fire Chiefs](#) and the [International Association of Fire Fighters](#).
- Participate in the Courage to be Safe program that emphasizes the message that "[Everyone Goes Home](#)."
- Implement or expand fire prevention programs to help reduce fires.
- Participate in the [National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's](#) National Fire Service [Seat Belt Pledge](#) that encourages firefighters to wear seat belts in fire department vehicles.
- Explore safer strategies and tactics for fighting enclosed structure fires by publishing findings and recommendations revealed during firefighter fatality investigations.
- Promote the use of residential sprinklers to reduce fire deaths and property losses.
- Engage in pre-fire incident planning by suppression personnel for high-risk occupancies. Planning should include firefighter and occupant life safety, water supply, and structural hazards.
- Include fire prevention and firefighter fatality prevention in all firefighter training and education, including initial training in firefighter academies.
- Emphasize training on [modern construction technologies](#). Lightweight structural materials and green building practices can change building performance and fire behavior and how these elements impact firefighter safety and fire-ground operations.
- Implement a vehicle operations program, such as the Emergency Vehicles Operators Course. Fire department personnel should know driving skills, vehicle and operator limitations, and liability issues.
- Complete the National Safety Council's [Defensive Driving Course](#). Retake the course every three years.

Everyone Goes Home: 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives

The [16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives](#) were developed by representatives of major fire service constituencies at a Firefighter Safety Summit.

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation was tasked with creating awareness about the initiatives and developing material to support the implementation. The initiatives have become the foundation for fire departments and EMS organizations to ensure firefighters and medics return home safely after every shift.

1. Cultural change

Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety; incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability, and personal responsibility.

2. Accountability

Enhance the personal and organizational accountability for health and safety throughout the fire service.

3. Risk management

Focus greater attention on the integration of risk management with incident management at all levels, including strategic, tactical, and planning responsibilities.

4. Empowerment

All firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe practices.

5. Training and certification

Develop and implement national standards for training, qualifications, and certification (including regular recertification) that are equally applicable to all firefighters, based on the duties they are expected to perform.

6. Medical and physical fitness

Develop and implement national medical and physical fitness standards that are equally applicable to all firefighters based on the duties they are expected to perform.

7. Research agenda

Create a national research agenda and data collection system that relates to the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives.

8. Technology

Utilize available technology wherever it can produce higher levels of health and safety.

9. Fatality, near-miss investigation

Thoroughly investigate all firefighter fatalities, injuries, and near-misses.

10. Grant support

Grant programs should support the implementation of safe practices and procedures and/or mandate safe practices as an eligibility requirement.

11. Response policies

National standards for emergency response policies and procedures should be developed and championed.

12. Violent incident response

National protocols for response to violent incidents should be developed and championed.

13. Psychological support

Firefighters and their families must have access to counseling and psychological support.

14. Public education

Public education must receive more resources and be championed as a critical fire and life safety program.

15. Code enforcement and sprinklers

Advocacy must be strengthened for the enforcement of codes and the installation of home fire sprinklers.

16. Apparatus design and safety

Safety must be a primary consideration in the design of apparatus and equipment.

Firefighter safety recommendations

Recommendations from past SFMO investigation reports

Resource

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service, including safety, incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability, and personal responsibility. | National Safety Culture Change Initiative (FA-342), 2015 |
| 2. Establish standard operating procedures for minimum fire service-related occupational safety and health program requirements. | NFPA 1500, 2021 |
| 3. Provide all firefighters mandatory pre-placement and annual medical evaluations to determine their medical abilities to perform duties without presenting a significant risk to anyone's health and safety. | NFPA 1582, 2022 |
| 4. Perform annual physical ability evaluations to ensure firefighters are physically capable of performing job tasks. | NFPA 1583, 2022 |
| 5. Ensure that firefighters are cleared for duty by a doctor who knows about the physical demands of firefighting, the personal protective equipment used by firefighters, and the components. | NFPA 1582, 2021 |
| 6. Don't risk the safety of responders if there is no possibility of saving lives or property. | NFPA 1561, 2020
Admin. Code 435.15 (b.1-b.2) |
| 7. Always attack a wildland fire from the burned area. If a sudden change in conditions or wind occurs, the unit can retreat into the burned area. | Attack from the Black Wildland Fire Incident Management Field Guide (IMFG) |
| 8. Identify and communicate exit routes and safety zones to everyone on scene before fire operations begin. Staging areas shouldn't interfere with routes or safety zones. | NFPA 1143, 2018
Admin. Code 435.15 (a)
Essentials of Fire Fighting (EFF), 7th Edition, Chapter 5
Wildland Fire IMFG |
| 9. All firefighters on scene and engaged in firefighting operations must be in approved, full personal protective equipment suitable for the incident. | Wildland Fire IMFG
EFF, 7th Edition, Chapter 5 |
| 10. Fire departments must use an accountability system so the incident commander can quickly see all firefighters on scene, their location, and their assignment at any time. | Admin. Code 435.13 (b.3-b.4)(d) |
| 11. Educate firefighters and command staff on heat-related illnesses and prevention. | Report F2011-17, 2012 |
| 12. Establish a stationary command away from task-level operations. The command provides a quiet vantage point to receive, process, and relay information. It's also helpful in building and maintaining an effective fire ground organization. | NFPA 1561, 2020
Fire Command, 2nd Edition (2002) - Alan V. Brunacini
EFF, 7th Edition, Chapter 19 |
| 13. Personal protective equipment, including self-contained breathing apparatuses, is required when working in areas with potential hazards. | NFPA 1500, 2021
EFF, 7th Edition, Chapter 5
Admin. Code, Chapter 435 |
| 14. Use tools and tactics that help reduce roof operation dangers. Become familiar with the indicators of a collapse. | EFF, 7th Edition, Chapter 11
Fire Service Ventilation. IFSTA. |
| 15. Consider monitoring and recording fire ground activity. | NFPA 1221, 2019 |



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