

# STATE FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

## Firefighter Fatality Investigations



## ANNUAL REPORT FY 2009

Texas Department of Insurance  
Austin, Texas

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## Executive Summary

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During the State of Texas fiscal year 2009, the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) conducted one firefighter fatality incident investigation, involving two fatalities.

The following table provides information on each firefighter.

**Table 1: 2009 FFF Descriptions**

<b>Firefighter Name</b>	<b>Date of Death</b>	<b>Incident Description</b>
<b>Captain James Arthur Harlow, Sr.</b>	April 12, 2009	Fatally injured during firefighting operations
<b>Firefighter Damion Jon Hobbs</b>	April 12, 2009	Fatally injured during firefighting operations

While the SFMO was notified of other firefighter fatalities during this fiscal year, this was the only incident that was within the SFMO's statutory authority to investigate.

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## **Texas Firefighter Fatality Investigation Authority**

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The State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) is statutorily required to conduct an investigation if a firefighter dies in the line of duty in connection with a firefighting incident in the State of Texas, as prescribed by Texas Government Code Section 417.0075.

The statute requires the SFMO to investigate the circumstances surrounding each firefighter death to determine factors that may have contributed to the death. These factors include:

- the cause and origin of the fire,
- the condition of the structure, and
- the suppression operation.

The State Fire Marshal is required to coordinate the investigative efforts of local government officials and may enlist established fire service organizations and private entities to assist in the investigation. Additionally, the State Fire Marshal may appoint an Advisory Committee to provide Firefighter Fatality Investigation Program policy guidance. The following entities serve on the Firefighter Fatality Advisory Committee:

- State Firemen's & Fire Marshals' Association of Texas;
- Texas State Association of Fire Fighters;
- Texas Fire Marshal's Association;
- Texas Fire Chiefs Association;
- Texas Commission on Fire Protection;
- Texas Forest Service;
- Texas Engineering Extension Service, Emergency Services Training Institute, Texas A&M University System; and
- Texas metropolitan fire departments (including Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio).

## **FY 2009 Investigation Summary**

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On April 12, 2009, City of Houston Fire Department (HFD) Engine 26 Captain James A. Harlow, Sr., and Probationary Firefighter Damion J. Hobbs were fatally injured during firefighting operations at a residential, single-family house fire. Just after midnight at 12:06 AM, Houston 911 received a report of a house fire at 7811 Oak Vista, inside the city limits of Houston, Texas.

Captain Harlow and Firefighter Hobbs responded to the scene on Engine 26 from Station 26, approximately 2 miles from the fire scene, arriving at the front, west side of the house 7 minutes after dispatch. Captain Harlow and Firefighter Hobbs entered the front door of the house and advanced a line to the central hallway and den where they were overcome by a rapid fire growth. The travel and intensity of the fire was influenced by a 15- to 20-mph wind across the open area of the bayou from the east-southeast with gusts topping 25 mph, blowing into the house through the rear windows. Rapid fire growth forced Captain Harlow and Firefighter Hobbs to withdraw and they collapsed while attempting to exit. Captain Harlow was found in the dining room and Firefighter Hobbs was found in living room. Both were removed to the front yard where attempts at resuscitation failed. They were transported by ambulance from the scene to the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office for post-mortem examinations.

Captain Harlow, a 50-year-old, 30-year veteran of the Houston Fire Department, made Captain in 2004. Probationary Firefighter Hobbs, a 29-year-old rookie and 10-year military veteran, was responding to his first house fire.

The investigation is complete, but the final report has not been issued.

Each published firefighter fatality report contains incident specific findings on factors contributing to the fatality and recommendations for future practices. These reports can be located at the SFMO's website, <http://www.tdi.state.tx.us/fire/fmlodinvesti.html>.

## **National Firefighter Death Composite, 2008**

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The United States Fire Administration (USFA) released *Firefighter Fatalities in the United States in 2008* in September 2009. This report provides an in-depth analysis of 118 on-duty deaths that occurred in the United States during 2008.

The report continues a series of annual studies by the USFA of on-duty firefighter fatalities in the United States.

The unique and specific objective of *Firefighter Fatalities in the United States* is to identify all on-duty firefighter fatalities that occurred in the United States and its protectorates during the calendar year and to present in summary narrative form the circumstances surrounding each occurrence.

An overview of the 118 firefighters that died while on duty in 2008 reveals:

- The total break down included 66 volunteer, 34 career, and 18 wildland agency firefighters.
- There were 5 firefighter fatality incidents where 2 or more firefighters were killed, claiming a total of 18 firefighters' lives.
- 26 firefighters were killed during activities involving brush, grass or wildland firefighting, more than twice the number killed the previous year.
- Activities related to emergency incidents resulted in the deaths of 75 firefighters.
- 28 firefighters died while engaging in activities at the scene of a fire.
- 21 firefighters died while responding to, and 3 while returning from, emergency incidents.
- 12 firefighters died while they were engaged in training activities.
- 13 firefighters died after the conclusion of their on-duty activity.
- Heart attacks were the most frequent cause of death for 2008 with 45 firefighter deaths.

Year-to-date monthly and annual USFA firefighter fatality reports are posted on the USFA's Web site at [http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/fireservice/fatalities/statistics/ff\\_stats.shtm](http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/fireservice/fatalities/statistics/ff_stats.shtm).

## **Strategies for Preventing Future Fatalities**

Ongoing efforts to reduce firefighter fatalities include the following:

- Communicating findings and recommendations from firefighter fatality investigations through the publication of investigation reports, dissemination of information to the Firefighter Fatality Advisory Committee, and presentations at fire service conferences.

- Upon release, firefighter fatality investigation reports are sent to the affected fire departments and placed on the agency's website for access by the fire service, media, and the public.
- Since the inception of firefighter fatality investigation reporting in September 2001, there have been more than 201,482 individual report downloads.
- Participating in the Firefighter Safety Stand Down, sponsored by the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the International Association of Fire Fighters.
- Participating in the "Courage to be Safe" (CTBS) program, which emphasizes the message "Everyone Goes Home." Information on the CTBS program is available online at <http://www.everyonegoeshome.com>.
- Implementing or expanding existing fire prevention programs to assist in reducing fires.
- Participating in the National Fire Service Seat Belt Pledge, which encourages firefighters to wear seat belts when riding in a fire department vehicle. Information on the Seat Belt Pledge can be located online at <http://www.everyonegoeshome.com/seatbelts>
- Exploring safer strategies and tactics for fighting fires in enclosed structures.

## **Statistics and Trends in Firefighter Fatality Investigations**

The SFMO has investigated 32 firefighter fatalities since the program's inception in 2001, as directed by the 77<sup>th</sup> legislative session. All investigated findings fell into three categories: *Medical Conditions*, *Fireground Operations*, and *Motor Vehicle Incidents*.

**Table 2: Number and Category of Finding**

<b>Number of Firefighter Fatalities Investigated</b>	<b>Category</b>
13 (40%)	Medical Conditions
12 (38%)	Fireground Operations
7 (22%)	Motor Vehicle Incidents

**Table 3: Number and percentage of fatalities for career and volunteer fire departments**

<b>Career</b>	<b>Volunteer/Combination</b>
14 (44%)	18 (56%)

**Table 4: Fatalities Reported by Year**

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Number of Fatalities</b>	<b>Category</b>
2002	6	All Categories
2003	7	All Categories
2004	3	Fireground Operations; Medical Conditions
2005	6	All Categories
2006	3	Motor Vehicle Incidents
2007	3	Fireground Operations
2008	2	Fireground Operations; Medical Conditions
2009	2	Fireground Operations
<b>Annual Firefighter Fatality Average = 4</b>		