

# TEXAS STATE FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

## Firefighter Fatality Investigation



Investigation Number FFF FY 13-02

**Firefighter Jalen Shaquille Smith**

Jackson Heights Fire Department  
Tyler, Texas  
December 3, 2012

Texas Department of Insurance  
Austin, Texas

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## Acknowledgements

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The Texas State Fire Marshal wishes to thank the following entities for their cooperation and assistance in the investigation of this incident and the preparation of this report:

Jackson Heights Fire Department

Smith County Fire Marshal's Office

Texas Highway Patrol

East Texas Medical Center

Texas A&M Forest Service

State Firemen's and Fire Marshals' Association

Texas Association of Firefighters

Texas Fire Chiefs Association

Texas Commission on Fire Protection

Texas Engineering and Extension Services

## Executive Summary

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On November 30, 2012, at approximately 10:13 p.m., Jackson Heights Fire Department Firefighter Jalen Shaquille Smith, a 20-year-old member of the department, was fatally injured as a result of a motor vehicle accident. Smith was a passenger in the front seat of a privately owned vehicle responding to a report to the Jackson Heights Fire Department about a motor vehicle accident. The driver of the privately owned vehicle lost control of the vehicle and the vehicle left the roadway. The vehicle rolled after sliding sideways along the roadway and Smith was ejected from the vehicle.

Jalen Smith was transported to the East Texas Medical Center and remained there until his death on December 3, 2012. No autopsy was conducted. The cause of death is listed as massive blunt force trauma to the head.

The State Fire Marshal's Office recommends that fire departments incorporate the following into department policies and procedures.

***“Seat belts must be worn at all times once an apparatus or vehicle is in motion.”***

This report is to honor Firefighter Jalen Shaquille Smith by taking the lessons learned from this tragic incident so that others may not perish.



Firefighter Jalen Shaquille Smith, 20, of the Jackson Heights Fire Department.

# Introduction

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The State Fire Marshal's Office was notified by the Smith County Fire Marshal's Office that Firefighter Jalen Smith of the Jackson Heights Fire Department was critically injured while responding to the fire station to respond to a motor vehicle accident on November 30, 2012. Firefighter Smith succumbed to the injuries on December 3, 2012.

The State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) commenced the firefighter fatality investigation under the authority of Texas Government Code Section 417.0075.

- (a) *In this section, the term "firefighter" includes an individual who performs fire suppression duties for a governmental entity or volunteer fire department.*
- (b) *If a firefighter dies in the line of duty or if the firefighter's death occurs in connection with an on-duty incident in this state, the state fire marshal shall investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of the firefighter, including any factors that may have contributed to the death of the firefighter.*
- (c) *In conducting an investigation under this section, the state fire marshal has the same powers as those granted to the state fire marshal under Section 417.007. The state fire marshal will coordinate the investigative efforts of local government officials and may enlist established fire service organizations and private entities to assist in the investigation.*
- (d) *The state fire marshal will release a report concerning an investigation conducted under this section on completion of the investigation.*
- (e) *Not later than October 31 of each year, the state fire marshal will deliver to the commissioner a detailed report about the findings of each investigation conducted under this section in the preceding year.*
- (f) *Information gathered in an investigation conducted under this section is subject to Section 552.108.*
- (g) *The authority granted to the state fire marshal under this section will not limit in any way the authority of the county or municipal fire marshal to conduct the county or municipal fire marshal's own investigation into the death of a firefighter within the county or municipal fire marshal's jurisdiction.*

Texas State Fire Marshal Chris Connealy assigned Chief Investigator Dean Shirley to investigate the firefighter fatality. Smith County Fire Marshal Jim Seaton assisted throughout the investigation of the incident.

# Jackson Heights Fire Department

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The Jackson Heights Fire Department was established in 1981 as an all-volunteer department. Today it is a combination paid and volunteer department with 2 fire stations and a roster of 21 volunteers and 6 paid members. The department is located east of Tyler, Texas, in northern Smith County, as part of Emergency Services District (ESD) #2 and serves approximately 6500 residents in a 70-square-mile area. Apparatus included two 1000-gallon engines, one 1600-gallon tanker, one 400-gallon quick attack, two 400-gallon brush trucks, one 300-gallon brush truck, a support vehicle, and a cascade trailer. The department averages 35 calls per month, totaling nearly 400 calls annually.

## ***Membership and Training***

The department currently requires persons requesting membership to complete an application, pass a background check, pass an interview, and attend three meetings or training sessions before being voted onto probation by a majority of the department. A new member must complete a six-month probationary period, after which the Chief makes a recommendation to the Executive Board to approve or disapprove the membership. Probationary members are urged to complete the State Firemen's and Fire Marshals' Association (SFFMA) Introductory Firefighter certification by the end of their probationary period. To maintain status as an active member, a member must respond to 40 percent of the drills and 25 percent of the alarms monthly.

The department has a Junior Firefighter program for persons 15 to 17 years old and they may participate in trainings, emergency calls and work sessions, provided the junior firefighter has written permission signed by a parent on file and recommendation by an active department mentor.

To work on shift, all firefighters must pass a department-approved drug test, doctor's physical examination, and a Department of Public Safety background check. A member must also pass a physical agility test, and be interviewed and approved by a three-member interview board. A firefighter must hold an SFFMA or TCFP Basic Firefighter<sup>1</sup> Certification, EMT-B or higher certification, and hold a valid Texas class B exempt driver's license.

Jalen Smith began as a junior firefighter at 15 years of age; at the age of 19 he was accepted as a probationary member, on October 1, 2011. He was accepted as an active member in June 2012. Firefighter Smith had been approved for the Kilgore Fire Academy by the department officers, with the class beginning January 2013. His training included Courage to be Safe (a state-wide mandatory training course) on August 4, 2012; East Texas Medical Center Landing Zone training, August 25, 2012; Apparatus Practice, July 30, 2012; and Advancing Hoselines training, June 30, 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> SFFMA Basic certification no longer exists. It is now Introductory, Firefighter I, Firefighter II or Master.

## **Incident Investigation/Timeline of Activities**

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*The following information is provided by the State Fire Marshal's Office, Jackson Heights Fire Department, Smith County Sheriff's Office, Smith County Fire Marshal, and the Texas Highway Patrol. Times noted are approximated from interviews, statements, and incident reports.*

### **November 30, 2012**

*Weather conditions were clear with temperature of 63°, dew point 58°, and humidity of 84%.<sup>2</sup>*

**1756** The Smith County Sheriff's Office received a report of a motor vehicle accident involving a tractor trailer and vehicle at 21601 Farm to Market (FM) 2767.

The Jackson Heights Fire Department was dispatched to the accident and Firefighter Jalen Smith received a page notification. Firefighter Smith responded to the fire station in a personally owned vehicle.

**1805** Firefighter Jalen Smith responded to the accident scene on Brush 2 with two other firefighters.

**1811** Brush 2 arrived on scene with Firefighter Jalen Smith and two other firefighters.

Firefighter Jalen Smith assisted at the scene and then boarded the East Texas Medical Center ambulance to assist while enroute to the East Texas Medical Center.

**1922** Jackson Heights Fire Department cleared from the scene on FM 2767.

Two Jackson Heights Fire Department firefighters drove a personally owned vehicle to the East Texas Medical Center and picked up Firefighter Smith at the hospital emergency room. Firefighter Smith then traveled home to get refreshed to travel to a state playoff football game within the city of Tyler.

**2145** The Smith County Sheriff's Office was notified of a vehicle roll-over accident located at 12400 FM 2767.

**2147** Jackson Heights Fire Department was dispatched to the accident.

**2155** Jackson Heights Fire Department Engine 1 responded to the motor vehicle accident (MVA) scene with two firefighters.

Firefighter Jalen Smith received a page notification and responded to the fire station in a

department member's personally owned vehicle. Firefighter Smith was enroute to a football game at a local stadium when the page went out. The vehicle was driven by the department member and Firefighter Smith was riding in the front passenger seat, and another civilian (proposed department member) was riding in the rear seat. While responding to the accident, the volunteer firefighter driving the POV lost control of the vehicle after reaching the top of a small hill and a slight right curve in the roadway. The speed limit in that area is 60 mph.

**2159** The Smith County Sheriff's Office received notification of a second vehicle roll-over accident at 8900 FM 2767.

**2201** Chapel Hill Volunteer Fire Department was dispatched to the second vehicle roll over.

**2206** Jackson Heights Fire Department was dispatched for mutual aid assistance to the second vehicle roll-over accident.

**2207** Jackson Heights Fire Department Engine 1 was released from the first MVA and responded to the location of the second MVA to assist.

**2209** Jackson Heights Engine 1 arrived on scene of the MVA, to discover that Firefighter Smith was a victim involved in the roll-over accident.

Information included in the Texas Highway Patrol accident investigation report indicates the driver lost control when avoiding a vehicle that crossed in front of him and turned left. The driver veered to the right and applied the brakes, leaving the right side of the roadway and then sliding. The vehicle slid sideways onto the grass along the roadway, and continued to rotate while moving backwards. The vehicle hit a slight embankment over a private driveway, causing the vehicle to vault over the driveway and begin rolling over. The vehicle struck a pole and rolled several times before coming to rest more than 400 feet from where it left the roadway. As the vehicle rolled, Firefighter Jalen Smith was ejected from the front passenger seat. The vehicle came to rest on its roof. The investigation revealed that none of the occupants were wearing seatbelts.

Firefighter Jalen Smith was transported to the East Texas Medical Center and remained there until his death on December 3, 2012. No autopsy was conducted. The cause of death is listed as massive blunt force trauma to the head.

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<sup>2</sup> Wunderground.com

The Texas Highway Patrol conducted the accident investigation. No driving violations were noted and no citations were issued. Road conditions were clear but damp from moisture in the air.



View of the area where the vehicle left the roadway



View of area showing the tire marks and the driveway before rolling over



View toward the hill from where the vehicle stopped



The condition of the vehicle

## **Findings and Recommendations**

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*Recommendations are based upon nationally recognized consensus standards and safety practices for the fire service. Fire departments and firefighting personnel should know and understand nationally recognized consensus standards. Fire departments should create and maintain SOGs and SOPs to ensure effective, efficient, and safe firefighting/training operations.*

*Although the following recommendations may not have prevented the death of Firefighter Jalen Smith, the State Fire Marshal's Office offers these recommendations to reduce the risk of injuries related to motor vehicle accidents.*

### **Finding 1:**

Firefighter Jalen Smith and the other occupants of the vehicle involved were not wearing safety belts.

**Texas Transportation Code Sec. 545.413** requires the use of safety belts by persons 15 years or older while riding in a passenger vehicle equipped with safety belts while the vehicle is being operated.

Jackson Heights Fire Department **Manual of Standard Operating Guidelines; Section C, #18** requires members to comply with Texas Motor Vehicle License laws.

**Recommendations:** All department personnel are required to wear safety belts whenever riding in a motor vehicle. Fire departments should incorporate the requirement to wear safety belts into the department Standard Operating Procedures/Guidelines.

***Essentials of Firefighting, Sixth edition, 2013; Chapter 2, Firefighter Safety and Health:*** “Seat belts must be worn at all times once an apparatus or vehicle is in motion.”

### **16 Life Safety Initiatives**

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

Fire departments should promote and emphasize personnel safety and personal accountability at all times, even when not on duty.

All department personnel should take the *International First Responder Seat Belt Pledge*.

**“Wearing my seatbelt is the right thing to do–It is my life on the line! I Pledge to Wear My Seatbelt.”**

<http://everyonegoeshome.com/seatbelts/pledgesheet.pdf>

### **Additional Recommendation:**

The JHFD by-laws state “All drivers are recommended to complete an Emergency Driving Course before operating any vehicle.”

Fire Departments should incorporate a nationally recognized driver training course into department training programs including ***Defensive Driving*** and the National Standard Curriculum ***Emergency Vehicle Operator’s Course***. Programs are available through various sources including the U. S. Fire Administration (USFA), Volunteer Firemen’s Insurance Services (VFIS), and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Document Log**

<b>Document Number</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Description/Assignments</b>
1	Smith County Sheriff's Office	Incident Dispatch records
2	Jackson Heights FD	Incident Reports for three accidents of 11/30/2012
3	Texas Highway Patrol	Accident Investigation Report
4	Jackson Heights FD	Jason Umbower Statement
5	Jackson Heights FD	Victoria Young Statement
6	Jackson Heights FD	Russell Young Statement
7	Jackson Heights FD	Jalen Smith Application and Training Records
8	Jackson Heights FD	By-laws
9	Jackson Heights FD	Operating Guidelines
10	East Texas Medical Center	J. Smith medical records
11	Jackson Heights FD	VFIS Claim form
12	NE Texas Public Health	Death Certificate
13	Media	Obituary
14	Internet	Weather Information