

Texas State Fire Marshal's Office

Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report

October 2022

TDI | Texas Department
of Insurance





Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report

Fiscal year 2022

by the

Texas State Fire Marshal's Office

Submitted October 2022

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Orlando P. Hernandez".

Orlando P. Hernandez
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 (TCFP) establishes 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.

Investigation panel

The State Fire Marshal coordinates the investigative efforts of local government officials and may ask fire service organizations and private entities to help.

In September 2001, the State Fire Marshal appointed an investigation panel to provide policy guidance to the Firefighter Fatality Investigation Program. These groups serve on the panel:

- 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 conducted firefighter fatality incident investigations of three events that resulted in four deaths:

Capt. Wesley Vandever, 86 years old

Sugar Hill Volunteer Fire Department (VFD)
September 27, 2021 | On-duty medical event

At 6:02 p.m. on September 27, 2021, Sugar Hill VFD and all Titus County fire departments were dispatched to a structure fire in Mt. Pleasant, Texas.

Sugar Hill VFD arrived and began fire suppression activities. During suppression, Capt. Vandever was found unconscious at the fire engine pump panel.

First responders began advanced life support and transported Capt. Vandever to the hospital where he later died.

This death is classified as an on-duty fatality.

Assistant Chief Ross Estabrooks, 47 years old

Tri-Lakes VFD
November 15, 2021 | On-duty medical

At 4:06 p.m. on November 15, 2021, Nortex VFD and all Titus County fire departments were dispatched to a structure fire in Pittsburg, Texas.

Tri-Lakes Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Chief Estabrooks arrived in his personal vehicle and checked in with command. He then donned his personal protective equipment and entered the structure with a second firefighter to complete extinguishment.

When Assistant Chief Estabrooks exited the structure and began removing his equipment, he went to his knees in a resting position. He collapsed to the ground and fell unconscious. First responders began advanced life support and transported him to the hospital, where he later died.

This death is classified as an on-duty fatality.



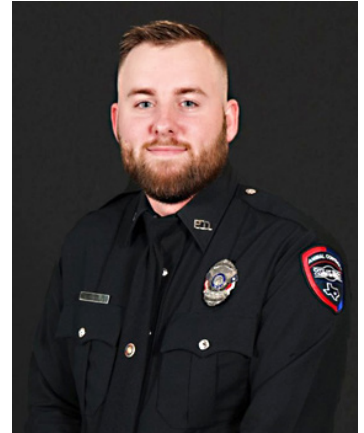
Assistant Chief Jonathon Coco, 25 years old
Firefighter Hunter Coco, 21 years old

Caldwell County ESD #2 Maxwell VFD
June 20, 2022 | Vehicle collision

At 1:43 p.m. on June 20, 2022, Caldwell County ESD #2 Maxwell VFD apparatus Brush 73 was in a roll-over accident with another vehicle in Lockhart on its way back from responding to a wildland fire.

Assistant Chief Jonathon Coco and Firefighter Hunter Coco were pronounced dead at the scene.

These deaths are classified as on-duty fatalities.



Pending prosecution for 2017 firefighter fatality

At 9:12 p.m. on May 18, 2017, the San Antonio Fire Department (SAFD) responded to a structure fire on Ingram Road in San Antonio.

SAFD Ladder 35 (L35) and Engine 35 (E35) arrived on the scene and saw smoke inside the Spartan Boxing Gym. Firefighters made forcible entry through the front doors. The E35 crew was assigned suppression, and L35 Firefighters Scott Deem and Brad Phipps were assigned to search the gym.

During their search, Firefighters Deem and Phipps located 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.
- An 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 stopped. 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.

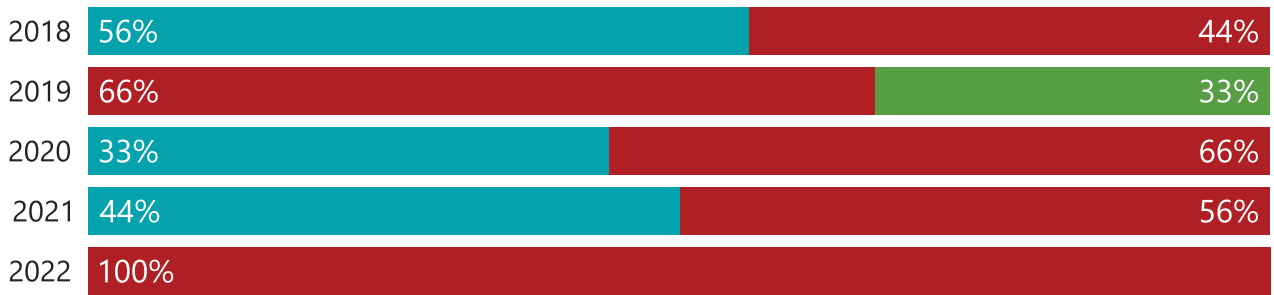
The SFMO firefighter fatality coordinator was notified of the incident and responded. The State Response Team was also dispatched.

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.

SFMO investigators continue to meet with the Bexar County Criminal District Attorney's Office to provide investigation details on the fire origin and cause and the firefighter fatality. The case is pending prosecution.

Fire investigation and fatality statistics

SFMO firefighter fatality investigations by fiscal year



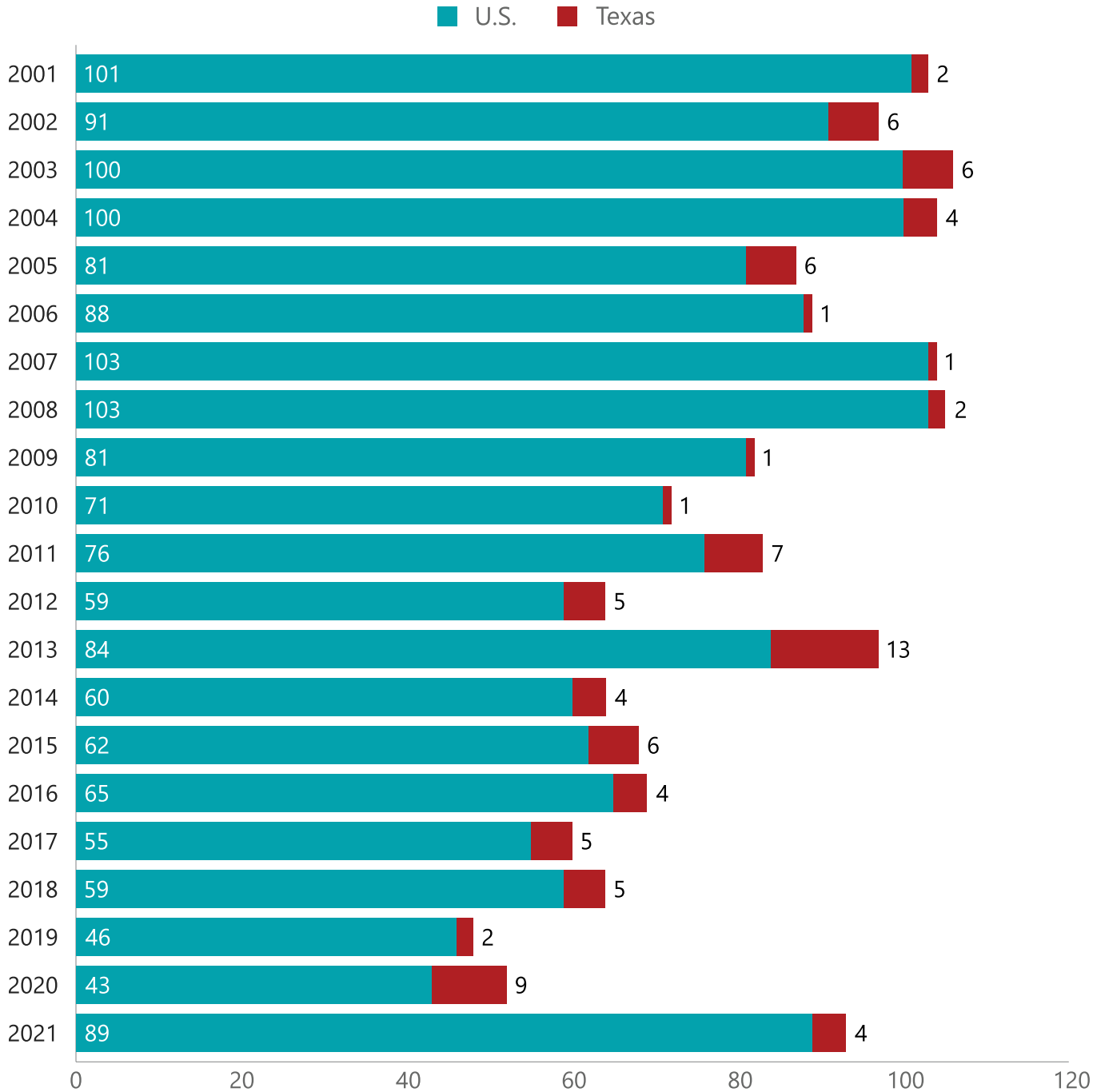
Fiscal year	■ Paid	■ Volunteer	■ U.S. Forest Service
2018	5	4	-
2019	-	2	1
2020	4	5	-
2021	2	2	-
2022	-	3	-

Fatalities investigated by SFMO since 2001



■ Medical condition	53	45%
■ Fireground operations	40	34%
■ Motor vehicle accident	22	18%
■ On-duty incident	3	3%
■ Other	1	1%

U.S. and Texas on-duty firefighter deaths by calendar year



Firefighter fatality prevention strategies

SFMO encourages the use of 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 investigations reports to affected fire departments and posts 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: The 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives

[The 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives](#) were developed in 2004 by representatives of major fire service constituencies at a Firefighter Safety Summit in Tampa, Florida.

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 code 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

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, 2018
3. Provide mandatory pre-placement and annual medical evaluations to all firefighters 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, 2018
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), 6th Edition, Chapter 6 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, 6th Edition, Chapter 6
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, 6th Edition, Chapter 1
13. Personal protective equipment, including self-contained breathing apparatuses, is required when operating in areas with potential hazards.	NFPA 1500, 2021 EFF, 6th 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, 6th Edition, Chapter 11 Fire Service Ventilation. IFSTA.
15. Consider monitoring and recording fire ground activity.	NFPA 1221, 2019



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