

Texas State Fire Marshal's Office

# Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report

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October 2024

**TDI** | Texas Department  
of Insurance





# Firefighter Fatality Investigation Annual Report

Fiscal year 2024

by the

**Texas State Fire Marshal's Office**

Submitted October 2024

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

Debra Knight  
State Fire Marshal  
Texas Department of Insurance

# Contents

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- Overview** **2**

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- Investigations** **3**

  - Fiscal year 2024 investigations .....3
  - Fiscal year 2020 investigation update.....4

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- On-duty firefighter fatality investigation statistics** **5**

  - SFMO fiscal year on-duty firefighter fatality investigations by event type.....5
  - SFMO fiscal year on-duty firefighter fatality investigations by classification .....5

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- Firefighter fatality prevention strategies** **6**

---

- Everyone Goes Home: 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives** **7**

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- Firefighter safety recommendations** **9**

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# Overview

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[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.

## 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

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In fiscal year 2024, SFMO investigated four firefighter fatality incidents that resulted in four deaths.

## Fiscal year 2024 investigations

### Joe Parish, 67 years old

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#### Diboll Volunteer Fire Department

September 1, 2023 | On-duty vehicle collision

On August 30, 2023, Firefighter Parish was responding to a request for mutual aid from Fuller Springs, when his personal vehicle left the road and crashed.

Firefighter Parish was air-lifted to a Tyler hospital where he died the next day.



### Daniel Potts, 74 years old

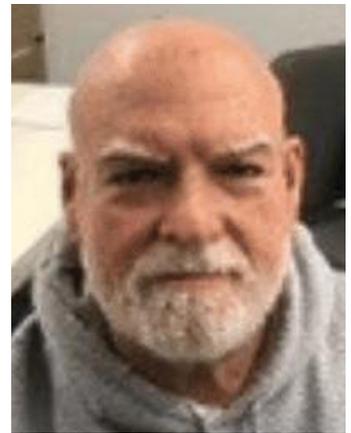
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#### Whitney Volunteer Fire Department

November 24, 2023 | On-duty medical event

On November 24, 2023, Safety Officer Potts was getting into his support vehicle at the fire station to respond to a residential fire. He was later found unconscious.

He was pronounced dead from a medical emergency.



### John Norris, 55 years old

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#### Forest Bend Volunteer Fire Department

November 25, 2023 | On-duty medical event

On November 25, 2023, Chief Norris responded to a structure fire at an abandoned house that was scheduled for demolition.

Shortly after returning home, he suffered a medical emergency and was transported to the HCA Houston Healthcare Clear Lake Hospital where he died.



## Zeb Smith, 40 years old

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### Fritch Volunteer Fire Department

March 5, 2024 | On-duty medical event

On March 5, 2024, Chief Smith was the first to arrive at a house fire. He entered the home to check for occupants but didn't exit.

Firefighters found him unresponsive and began medical treatment.

He was transported to the Golden Plains Community Hospital where he later died.



## Fiscal year 2020 investigation update

In fiscal year 2020, SFMO investigated a vehicle collision in Lubbock that killed a firefighter and injured another. The injured firefighter suffered a traumatic brain injury. He died in November 2023.

## Matthew Dawson, 34 years old

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### Lubbock Fire Rescue

November 26, 2023 | On-duty vehicle accident

On January 11, 2020, Lubbock Fire Rescue were dispatched to the scene of a motor vehicle accident on northbound Interstate 27.

While on the scene, a southbound vehicle lost control and crossed the center median. The car struck two Lubbock firefighters and a Lubbock police officer, who was killed at the scene.

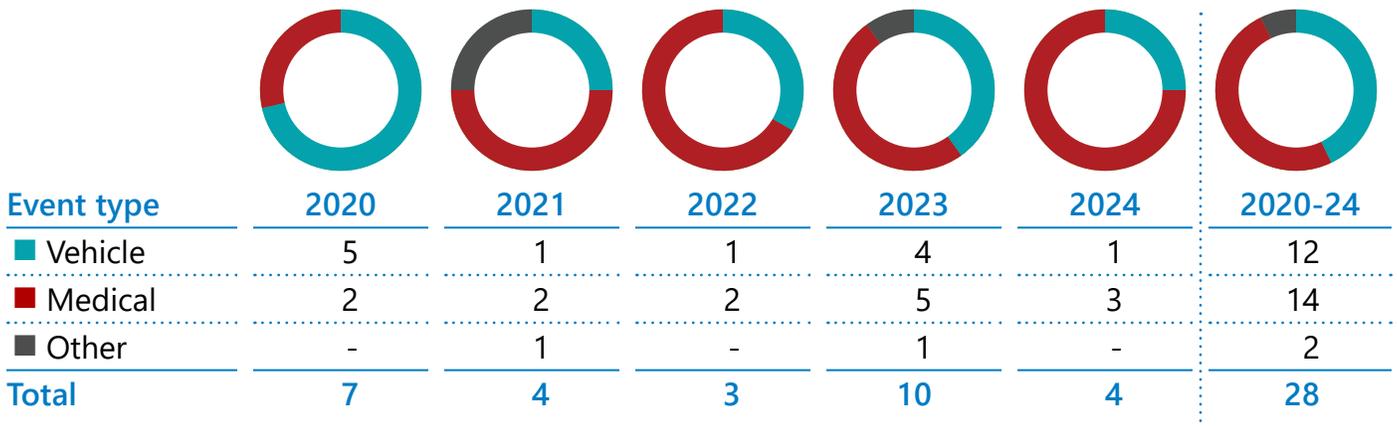
Lubbock Fire Lt. Hill and Firefighter Dawson were transported to the hospital, where Lt. Hill died the next day. Firefighter Dawson suffered a traumatic brain injury. He died after three years of long-term health challenges.



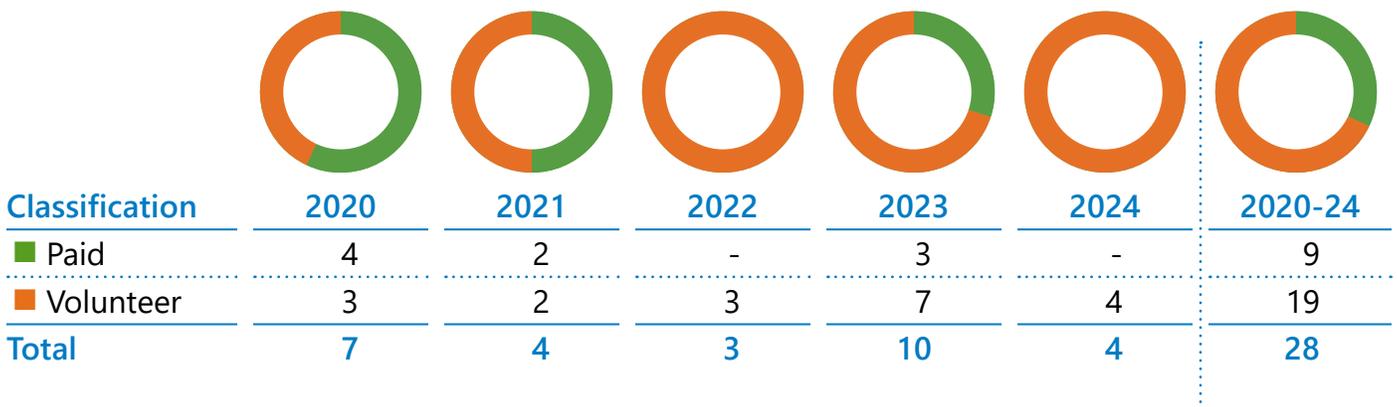
# On-duty firefighter fatality investigation statistics

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 2023, there were 92 firefighter fatalities (non-COVID-19 related) in the country.

## SFMO fiscal year on-duty firefighter fatality investigations by event type



## SFMO fiscal year on-duty firefighter fatality investigations by classification



## Firefighter fatality prevention strategies

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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.	<a href="#">National Safety Culture Change Initiative (FA-342), 2015</a>
2. Establish standard operating procedures for minimum fire service-related occupational safety and health program requirements.	<a href="#">NFPA 1500, 2021</a>
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.	<a href="#">NFPA 1582, 2022</a>
4. Perform annual physical ability evaluations to ensure firefighters are physically capable of performing job tasks.	<a href="#">NFPA 1583, 2022</a>
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.	<a href="#">NFPA 1582, 2021</a>
6. Don't risk the safety of responders if there is no possibility of saving lives or property.	<a href="#">NFPA 1561, 2020</a> <a href="#">Texas Admin. Code 435.15 (b.1-2)</a>
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.	<a href="#">Attack from the Black video</a> <a href="#">Wildland Fire Incident Management Field Guide (IMFG)</a>
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.	<a href="#">NFPA 1143, 2018</a> <a href="#">Texas Admin. Code 435.15 (a)</a> Essentials of Fire Fighting (EFF), 7th Edition, Chapter 5 <a href="#">IFSTA.org</a> <a href="#">Wildland Fire IMFG</a>
9. All firefighters on scene and engaged in firefighting operations must be in approved, full personal protective equipment suitable for the incident.	<a href="#">Wildland Fire IMFG</a> 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.	<a href="#">Texas Admin. Code 435.13 (b.3-4)(d)</a>
11. Educate firefighters and command staff on heat-related illnesses and prevention.	<a href="#">Report F2011-17, 2012</a>
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.	<a href="#">NFPA 1561, 2020</a> 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.	<a href="#">NFPA 1500, 2021</a> EFF, 7th Edition, Chapter 5 <a href="#">Texas Admin. Code, Chapter 435</a>
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
15. Consider monitoring and recording fire ground activity.	<a href="#">NFPA 1221, 2019</a>



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