



# Fire Marshal's Alert!

May 15, 2008

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## Take the Seat Belt Pledge

### **Buckle Up For Safety. Seat Belts Save Lives.**

These safety phrases have been around for so long that most Americans can't remember life without them. They speak an indisputable truth, so much so that not wearing a seat belt has been a ticketable offense for more than 20 years in Texas.

Why, then, have five of the 26 firefighter fatalities investigated by the SFMO since September 2001 involved victims who were not using seat belts or similar restraining devices?

One of these fatalities was Firefighter Christopher Brian Hunton, age 27, a member of the Amarillo Fire Department. On April 23, 2005, as his ladder truck was responding to an alarm, Hunton was putting his gear on. The door opened on a turn, and he fell out. He died two days later from his injuries. He was not wearing his seat belt.

This death was so obviously preventable that, following Hunton's death, Firehouse.com contributor Dr. Burton A. Clark pushed forward an effort to change the culture of the fire service and get firefighters to wear their seat belts, and the National Fire Service Seat Belt Pledge drive began, challenging all fire departments to sign the pledge to always buckle up. Amarillo FD, not surprisingly, was an early signer. And less than three years later, on January 31, 2008, the worth of the department's dedication to the buckle-up pledge was proven.

That morning, Amarillo District Fire Chief Michael Campbell heard word of an engine rollover involving his shift coming from his scanner. Their engine was part of a 40-plus vehicle pileup. When he heard there was a fatality in the crash, "That really made my hairs stand up," he said, remembering the Hunton fatality. As he found out later, the one fatality was that of a civilian involved in the pileup. The four firefighters inside the engine escaped safely because every one of them was wearing a seat belt.

"The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, along with various stakeholders, established an aggressive timeline to reduce firefighter line of duty deaths 50 percent by year 2014. Many deaths are preventable. Many are related to responding to or from incidents. The simple act of fastening a seat belt vastly improves survivability in a collision. Achieving 100 percent compliance with the National Fire Service Seat Belt Pledge sends a clear message that your department is committed to firefighter safety for the sake of the firefighters, their families, and the community you serve," says Assistant Fire Chief Danny Kistner, Garland Fire Department and FEMA Region 6 - Regional Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives Advocate.

How is the National Fire Service Seat Belt Pledge drive going? Texas leads the nation in signers; as of April 2008, 18 Texas fire departments have made the pledge. That's an encouraging start, but there are thousands more departments, in Texas alone, that should pledge to keep their firefighters safer by making sure they buckle up, whether they have to create a new SOP or just observe an existing one.

"My office has statutory responsibility to investigate Texas firefighter fatalities," says State Fire Marshal Paul Maldonado. "That's a good thing because the investigations teach lessons that help us avoid future tragedies. We have learned a lesson and it is time to take action. Texas firefighters have been dying in the line of duty when seat belts were not used. I don't want to investigate and report on another such fatality, and I know that you don't want to suffer a firefighter fatality where seat belts were not used. There really is no excuse; every Texas fire department should take the seat belt pledge. Buckle up every time!"

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