

# STATE FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

## Firefighter Fatality Investigations



# ANNUAL REPORT

## FY 2007

Texas Department of Insurance  
Austin, Texas

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## Executive Summary

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During fiscal year 2007, the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) conducted two firefighter fatality incident investigations. The investigations involved three firefighter fatalities.

The three fiscal year 2007 fatalities involved structure firefighting incidents. The first incident, which resulted in one death, involved a commercial structure. The second incident, which resulted in two fatalities, involved a single family residence and remains under investigation.

The following table provides information on each fiscal year 2007 Texas firefighter fatality incident:

| <b>Firefighter Name</b>      | <b>Date of Death</b> | <b>Incident Description</b>                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Phillip Townsend, Denison FD | December 30, 2006    | Structural collapse of commercial building fire        |
| Kevin Williams, Noonday VFD  | August 3, 2007       | Residential structure interior firefighting operations |
| Austin Cheek, Noonday VFD    | August 3, 2007       | Residential structure interior firefighting operations |

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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 firefighter deaths 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 Chief's 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).
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## **FY 2007 Investigation Summaries**

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### **Firefighter Phillip Townsend**

Firefighter Phillip Townsend, age 31, died in an awning collapse during a commercial property fire on December 30, 2006. The fire occurred at a strip mall building located at 900 South Crockett Avenue inside the city limits of Denison, Texas. Firefighter Townsend, a first-year firefighter of the Denison Fire Department, and Fire Chief Weger were operating a hand line fire stream onto rolls of roofing materials on the building that were producing heavy smoke when the overhang collapsed, pinning both men. Following the collapse, most firefighters on the scene went to the location of the collapse to assist with rescue efforts. The firefighters used saws to remove parts of the wood overhang and Fire Chief Weger was freed approximately 10 minutes after the collapse. He was able to crawl out from underneath the overhang on his own. Firefighter Townsend was extricated approximately two minutes later, but was unresponsive. Rescuers began resuscitative efforts and he was transported to the Texoma Medical Center, where continued resuscitative efforts were unsuccessful. Firefighter Townsend was pronounced dead at 09:51 AM. The cause of death, as determined by the medical examiner, was attributed to blunt force injuries.

### **Firefighter Kevin Williams**

#### **Firefighter Austin Cheek**

Firefighter Kevin Williams, age 42, and Firefighter Austin Cheek, age 19, died while fighting a residential fire near the town of Bullard on August 3, 2007. Firefighter Williams, a five year veteran, and Firefighter Cheek, a first year firefighter, both with the Noonday Volunteer Fire Department, responded to the house fire in accordance with the Smith County Fire Department mutual aid agreement. Following the incident, the Smith County Fire Marshal's Office notified the State Fire Marshal's Office and the Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation Team immediately responded to the scene to conduct an investigation of the incident. The Smith County Fire Marshal's Office along with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms are working with the SFMO team to determine the facts of the incident. This case remains under investigation.

## **FY 2007 Firefighter Fatalities**

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In FY 2007, all three firefighter fatalities investigated occurred during fire ground operations. Factors which assist in preventing fatalities associated with fire ground operations include:

- maintaining firefighter accountability,
- establishing safety zones,
- adherence to an accepted Incident Command System,
- appointing an Incident Safety Officer,
- maintaining effective fire ground communication,
- requiring use of Personal Protective Equipment on the fire ground,
- safely and effectively utilizing fire ground resources, and
- identifying fire ground hazards associated with roof and floor truss systems.

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 on the SFMO's website, <http://www.tdi.state.tx.us/fire/fmloddiinvesti.html>.

## **National Firefighter Death Composite**

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The United States Fire Administration (USFA) released "Firefighter Fatalities in the United States" in July 2007. This report provides an in-depth analysis of 106 on-duty deaths that occurred in the United States during 2006.

### ***2006 USFA Annual Report – Overview of Findings***

106 firefighters died while on duty in 2006.

- 77 volunteer firefighters and 29 career firefighters died while on duty.
- There were 6 firefighter fatality incidents where 2 or more firefighters were killed, claiming a total of 17 firefighters' lives.
- 22 firefighters were killed during activities involving brush, grass, or wildland firefighting.
- Activities related to emergency incidents resulted in the deaths of 61 firefighters.
- 36 firefighters died while engaging in activities at the scene of a fire.
- 15 firefighters died while responding to or returning from emergency incidents.
- 9 firefighters died while they were engaged in training activities.
- 20 firefighters died after the conclusion of their on-duty activity.

- Heart attacks were the most frequent cause of death for 2006, with 50 firefighter deaths.
- 19 firefighters were killed as a result of vehicle crashes.

The USFA report can be found at [www.usfa.dhs.gov/fireservice/fatalities](http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/fireservice/fatalities)

## **Strategies for Preventing Future Fatalities**

Ongoing efforts to reduce firefighter fatalities include the following.

- Communicating “lessons learned” from firefighter fatality investigations through the publication of investigation reports and dissemination of information to the Firefighter Fatality Investigation Program Advisory Committee.
  - Upon release, firefighter fatality investigation reports are sent to the affected fire departments and placed on the agency’s Internet site 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 85,996 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.” In FY 2007, more than 70 fire department training officers participated in the CTBS train the trainer course, facilitated and co-sponsored by the SFMO, and 525 fire department personnel received the CTBS class. TEEEX and the CTBS Texas Advocates are now facilitating the scheduling of the course for Texas fire departments. 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.trainingdivision.com/seatbeltpledge.asp>.
- Exploring safer strategies and tactics for fighting fires in enclosed structures.

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

The SFMO has investigated 28 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*, *Fire Ground Operations* and *Motor Vehicle Incidents*.

### **Number and Category of Finding**

| <b><i>Number of Firefighter Fatalities Investigated</i></b> | <b><i>Category</i></b>  |
|---|-------------------------|
| 43% (12)  | Medical Conditions      |
| 32% (9)   | Fireground Operations   |
| 25% (7)   | Motor Vehicle Incidents |

### **Number and percentage of fatalities for paid and volunteer fire departments**

| <b>Paid</b>     | <b>Volunteer/Combination</b> |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| <b>43% (12)</b> | <b>57% (16)</b>              |

### **Fatalities Reported by Year**

| <b><i>Fiscal Year</i></b>                         | <b><i>Number of Fatalities</i></b> | <b><i>Category</i></b>                       |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| 2002  | 6                                  | All Categories                               |
| 2003  | 7                                  | All Categories                               |
| 2004  | 3                                  | Fireground Operations;<br>Medical Conditions |
| 2005  | 6                                  | All Categories                               |
| 2006  | 3                                  | Motor Vehicle Incidents                      |
| 2007  | 3                                  | Fireground Operations                        |
| <b>Annual Firefighter Fatality Average = 4.67</b> |                                    |  |