

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF INSURANCE

STATE FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Firefighter Line-of-Duty Death Immediate Action Guide for Fire Departments

The following protocols are recommended in the event of a line-of-duty death of a fire fighter. The very nature of these incidents will be traumatic to anyone associated with the incident. This guide has been developed by the State Fire Marshal's Office to aid you in assisting your department during this difficult time.

The following recommended protocols, as they apply to a specific incident, can help assure that a thorough investigation into all of the circumstances involved in the incident can take place. Hopefully, the investigation will identify information that may assist in the development of safety programs for firefighters.

State Fire Marshal's Office Contact

- Please call the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) immediately at **512-305-7900**. (This is a 24-hour number). A voice menu will lead you to press a number to report the incident. If you call after office hours, a service will take your name and number and a representative from the State Fire Marshal's Office will call you as soon as is possible. Make sure you tell the service you are reporting a line-of-duty death.
- Please have the following information ready when calling:
 - a. Your name, department, and a telephone number where you can be contacted. If possible, please provide a cellular telephone number and/or your departmental radio dispatcher telephone number to assist us in contacting you.
 - b. Time, date, and location of the incident. A brief description of the type of incident where the fatality occurred. (Structure fire, vehicle fire, wildland fire, etc.)
- You will be contacted by a member of the SFMO Investigative Team to gather more details, including detailed directions to the location of the incident. A Deputy State Fire Marshal will be dispatched to provide immediate assistance. The SFMO Investigative Team will follow as soon as possible to investigate the incident, assist the fire department and the family of the deceased firefighter(s), and prepare a detailed report of the incident. The investigative team from the State Fire Marshal's Office will usually arrive within hours. If any questions arise prior to the arrival of the team, contact the State Fire Marshal's Office for assistance.

- A detailed assistance handbook will be immediately shipped to the fire department to assist the survivors in developing funeral plans consistent with those used to honor fallen firefighters, obtaining benefits, etc.

Secure the Scene of the Incident

Note: If a fire is later suspected to have been intentionally set, the death of a firefighter or civilian will lead to a criminal investigation, where pertinent evidence is identified, **and protected**.

- Establish a security perimeter with the assistance of the appropriate local law enforcement agency.
- Coordinate and establish with the State Fire Marshal's Office on who will conduct the origin and cause investigation.
- Do not disturb the scene except to the extent necessary to complete extinguishment of any fire.
- Do not conduct any salvage and overhaul operations other than that required to complete extinguishment. Attempt to leave furnishings and building contents in their original location.
- Do not move any firefighting hand tools, hose lines, or other portable equipment in the area of the incident.
- If the deceased firefighter(s) was transported to a hospital, mortuary, or medical examiner, secure any personal protective equipment that was left at the scene. If possible, leave the protective equipment in the location where it was found. Any personal equipment removed in resuscitation efforts away from the incident scene should be collected, handled carefully, and stored in a secure, locked location. Any equipment that is wet should be allowed to air dry, unless flammable liquids are suspected. Clothing or equipment where flammable liquids are suspected should be placed in clean, sealed metal containers for laboratory analysis.
- Identify as many witnesses as possible at the fire scene and obtain their names and contact information.

Initial Release of Information Concerning Firefighter Death

- A firefighter death Notification Team, including the Fire Chief, should notify the immediate next-of-kin of the deceased firefighter, in person, as soon as possible, even as the items in #1 above are being completed.
- Request the news media's cooperation in withholding identification of the victim and other identifying information (pictures of Fire Department apparatus numbers, Station Numbers, etc.) to allow time for personal notification of the victim's immediate family.

- The Notification Team should include a family assistance officer, appointed by the department, to assist the family. The duties of the family assistance officer are described in other publications in this guide. The family assistance officer will be the fire department's point of contact with the family of the victim and will assist them in preparing for the funeral, filing for survivors benefits, and assist in obtaining assistance the family requests.
- Consider requesting the assistance of local fire departments to personally notify family members living in other cities.

Firefighter Cause/Manner of Death Determination

- If the body of the deceased firefighter is still at the scene of the incident, contact your medical examiner or justice of the peace and the appropriate law enforcement agency if not already at the scene. Contact the appropriate city/county government officials to inform them that a fatality has occurred.
- If, pursuant to state law, the body is removed from the scene prior to the arrival of an investigative team, please photograph the location of the body and surrounding area before removal. For confidentiality, the investigative team can arrange for photo developing in a secure laboratory outside your area.
- Upon pronouncement of death, request in writing that an autopsy be conducted and that the autopsy be conducted in accordance with the requirements of the U.S. Fire Administration autopsy protocol. (Enclosed in this handbook) This autopsy protocol is to obtain information **vital** in applying for survivor benefits from federal, state, and private agencies; and to assist in developing safety programs to reduce injuries and deaths in the fire service.

Post-Incident Release of Information

- Prior to the determination of the origin and cause of the fire and the cause of the firefighter's death, please caution department members to avoid making statements to the media speculating on these issues.
- A standard statement to the media with the time, date, and location of the incident and the identity of the deceased firefighter, and that the incident is under investigation should be sufficient. The investigative team from the State Fire Marshal's Office will include a public information specialist who can assist you with press releases.

Departmental Support

- Relieve firefighters involved in the incident as soon as possible. Be sure to emphasize confidentiality of the identity of the deceased and the importance of not speculating about the incident to the media.
- Consider using mutual aid units to relieve on-scene firefighters.

- As soon as departmental notification of the deceased firefighter's next-of-kin is completed, encourage other firefighters to contact their families as soon as possible to reassure them.
- All personnel released from the incident scene should immediately prepare a short statement of their independent recollection of the incident.
- Obtain telephone numbers and addresses to aid investigators in contacting firefighters that have left the scene or gone off duty.
- Notify all department members and ensure city or county officials, not previously notified, are informed of the fatality.
- Arrange for Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD) for department personnel involved in the incident, and make counseling available to all department members. If you are unable to contact a local CISD team, contact Mr. Paul Tabor at the Texas Department of Health, EMS Division. His office number is (512) 834-6700. Callers will receive a pager number to call if after hours.