U.S. FIRE INVESTIGATOR LINE OF DUTY DEATHS

1986 - 2026



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While several agencies and organizations track firefighter fatalities, tracking fire investigator fatalities is more challenging. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program reports on some fire investigator fatalities, but their reporting is not required. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) tracks annual on-duty and duty-related firefighter deaths, demographics, and causes, but only in statistical form. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics monitors fatal occupational injuries across all industries, including firefighting, through the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI). This means a firefighter who is also a fire investigator and dies in the line of duty (LODD) could be captured in the NFPA and CFOI data.

The CFOI does not include an occupation category for fire investigators. In the Fire Inspectors category, because the DOL groups inspectors and investigators together, only three were listed in 2014 for the 2011-2022 period. The only other occupation choice besides firefighter is firefighting and prevention workers, and for the same date range, it lists 286 fatalities.

The U.S. Fire Administration maintains a list of over four thousand fire service personnel, career and volunteer, who have died in the line of duty since 1990, including full names and an incident synopsis. 18 from my initial list are included, but 16 are not. Interestingly, it also listed 15 others that I did not have, and they have been added here. Some of these are also listed on the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation website. Some are not listed, which may be because they were not classified as firefighters.

This paper is a comprehensive list of U.S. fire investigator line-of-duty deaths (LODD) from multiple sources. The earliest record I've found is from 1986. The information here is based on multiple sources and, while I've made every effort to ensure the accuracy of this information, it is only as good as what is available online or what has been shared with me. I have listed every LODD where the data source indicated the person worked as a fire investigator, full- or part-time, career or volunteer, even if the death was from other fire service actions, and this is noted. These were all public fire investigators. I've found no information regarding fatalities among private fire investigators.

The fire investigator LODD number to date is 49. Here is the cause of death breakdown.

- Occupational cancer – 13
- Vehicle crash – 5
- Cardiac event – 12
- Homicide – 2
- Cerebrovascular Accident – 2
- Other injury/incident – 15

The ones that appear to be directly related to fire investigation work are highlighted in yellow in the list below. Below this table is a synopsis of some of the investigator work-related deaths, including information from the USFA database synopsis.

October 4, 1986	Dennis Donaldson, Orange County (CA) Fire Authority. Homicide - shot during an investigation.
June 29, 1994	Anthony Bullard, Greenville (TX) FD. Cerebral hemorrhage during PT class.
June 29, 1995	John E. Woodard, New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control. Heart attack at fire scene.
January 19, 1999	James H. McGroarty, Syracuse (NY) FD. Chimney collapse during scene investigation.
April 27, 1999	Wilbur Strait, Jr., Oregon Office of the State Fire Marshal. Heart attack while working in his office.
August 9, 2000	Steven M. Wilmot, Springfield (IL) FD. Injuries from a fall at the scene during investigation on 7/18/2000.
September 11, 2001	Ronald P. Bucca, FDNY FMO. Assisting with WTC evacuation.
September 11, 2001	Andre Fletcher, FDNY FMO. Assisting with WTC evacuation.
September 11, 2001	Vincent Kane, FDNY FMO. Assisting with WTC evacuation.
September 11, 2001	Kenneth Kumpel, FDNY FMO. Assisting with WTC evacuation.
September 11, 2001	Paul Pansini, FDNY FMO. Assisting with WTC evacuation.
July 4, 2002	John D. West, Camden County (NJ) Fire Marshal's Office and Mt. Ephraim Volunteer Fire Dept. Killed in a fire while operating as a firefighter.
October 26, 2003	Roy M. Duhon, Clute (TX) FD. Heart attack after getting home from an investigation.
March 10, 2005	James H. Mero, Jr., Essex County (NY) Office of Emergency Services. Heart attack.
June 16, 2007	Mark W. Kelsey, Charleston City (SC) FD. Killed in a fire while operating as a firefighter at the Charleston Super Sofa fire.
July 2, 2007	Ronald Y. Wiley, Richmond (CA) FD. Vehicle crash while returning from a meeting.
August 26,011	Stephen R. Cox, South Davis Metro Fire Agency (UT). Cardiac event during on-duty PT test.
February 16, 2012	Charles H. Waller, Memphis (TX) FD. Collapsed in office.

December 24, 2012	Martin J. McHale, FDNY FMO. Cardiac event while driving home from work after strenuous investigation.
October 14, 2013	David A. Heath, New Hanover County (NC) FD. Cardiac event while teaching on a training tower.
March 14, 2014	Tom Quesnel, Tucson (AZ) FD. Occupational cancer – Leukemia.
June 27, 2014	Samuel Escalante, Chula Vista (CA) FD. Heart attack.
November 20, 2014	Samir P. Ashmar, Upper Macungie Township (PA) FD. Cardiac event at home after work.
February 16, 2015	John W. Jennings, Jr., Lynchburg (VA) FD (ret.) and Bedford County (VA) Fire Rescue. Occupational cancer.
August 27, 2015	Frank J. Sousa, Bristol (RI) FD. Vehicle crash.
April 14, 2017	Robert A. Mentrasti, Fairview (NY) FD. Occupational cancer (WTC-related).
November 8, 2017	Gene M. Dannenfelser, Camden County (NJ) Fire Marshal's Office and Haddon Heights Volunteer Fire Department. Occupational cancer (WTC-related).
December 8, 2017	Sander B. Cohen, Office of the Maryland State Fire Marshal. Vehicle crash. Also killed an FBI agent.
January 17, 2018	Russell A. Achord, West Feliciana Parish (LA) Fire Protection District #1. Vehicle crash.
October 15, 2018	David C. Creasy, Richmond (VA) FD FMO. Occupational cancer.
January 31, 2019	Karen Shuart, Asheville (NC) FD FMO. Occupational cancer.
March 5, 2019	Jacob L. Ringering, Godfrey (IL) FPD. Killed in a partial structure collapse while operating as a firefighter.
May 15, 2019	Mitchell F. Lundgaard, Appleton (WI) FD. Homicide – shot by EMS patient while working as a firefighter.
November 30, 2019	Dennis M. Gilhooly, FDNY FMO. Occupational cancer (WTC-related).
January 19, 2020	Timothy P. Smith, CT Fire Marshal's Office, Orange. Vehicle crash.
February 18, 2020	Ramon C. Figueroa, Porterville (CA) FD. Killed in a fire while operating as a firefighter.
April 17, 2020	Joshua MacDonald, Berthoud (CO) FD. Contracted MRSA related to a fire scene investigation fall on 3/25/2016.
June 27, 2020	Ronald W. Wehlage, Jr., De Soto Rural Fire Protection District (MO). Cardiac event at home after working as a firefighter at a structure fire.

October 4, 2020	Stephen C. Collins, Fort Worth (TX) FD. Occupational cancer.
October 16, 2020	Lemuel Bruce, Houston (TX) Arson Unit. Homicide - shot while conducting surveillance.
June 22, 2021	Roland A. Gray, NYPD (ret.); Florida Division of Investigative and Forensic Services, Bureau of Fire, Arson & Explosives Investigations. Occupational cancer (WTC-related).
December 26, 2021	David S. Merritt, Orange County (NC) FMO. Occupational cancer.
January 4, 2022	Donald Gross, Lincoln (NE) FD. Sudden cardiac event.
January 8, 2022	Dewayne (Eddie) Fender, Asheville (NC) FD FMO. Occupational cancer.
November 2, 2022	Michael A. Horton, San Bernardino County (CA) Fire Protection District FMO. Occupational cancer.
May 23, 2022	Stephen M. Smith, West Douglas County (CO) Fire Protection District. Heart attack in car at home after going to a fire investigation.
August 9, 2024	George E. Snyder, Jr., FDNY FMO. Heart attack at home after work.
September 23, 2024	Timothy P. Hall, West Sacramento (CA) FD. Training accident.
March 6, 2026	Shawn Johnson, Minnetonka (MN) FD FMO. Occupational cancer.

Orange County (CA) Fire Department fire investigator Dennis Donaldson, 46, was shot and killed at about 1:30 am on October 4, 1986, while investigating a fire with the property owner, according to an article in the Los Angeles Times the next day.

John E. Woodard, 59, a fire investigator and firefighter from Bolivar in Allegany County, NY, died Thursday, June 29, 1995, in Strong Memorial Hospital, Rochester, after suffering a heart attack. Woodard was employed by the State Office of Fire Prevention and Control as a traveling fire investigator for 27 years. He served in the Friendship and Bolivar fire departments. He also served as a member of the Allegany County Firemen's Association, the Southwestern Firemen's Association, the state Firemen's Association, and the state Fire Chiefs Association.

On January 19, 1999, James H. McGroarty, a 43-year-old career fire investigator with the Syracuse (New York) Fire Department was killed during an investigation to determine the origin and cause of a residential fire that occurred on January 14, 1999, after a chimney collapsed onto him causing severe trauma. See NIOSH Fire Fighter Fatality Report F99-06.

On July 18, 2000, two public fire investigators in Illinois were conducting an origin and cause investigation at a fire scene when one of them, 47 -year-old Steven M. Wilmot of the Springfield FD, lost his balance and fell, pinning his camera between the left side of his chest and a bed frame. Later that evening, the victim sought medical attention for persistent, severe pain in his left lower chest area. Over the next 3 weeks, the victim was evaluated and treated both in and out of the hospital for complications resulting from the fall. These complications ultimately led to his death on August 9, 2000. From NIOSH Fire Fighter Fatality Report F2000-37, released April 23, 2001.



Karen Ann Shuart, 58, passed away January 31, 2019, from occupational cancer. She began her career with the Asheville (NC) Fire Department in 1994 and served her community for 25 years. As a dedicated member, Karen moved through the ranks during her tenure from firefighter, to engineer, to assistant fire marshal.

James Mero collapsed while investigating a residential structure fire and died on March 9, 2005. He served as a fire commissioner, Essex County arson investigator, and NYS fire instructor. In addition to his service with Essex County, he volunteered for 35 years and served as past chief of the Willsboro Fire Department. He was a member of the NYS Fire Investigators Association and the NYS Fire Chiefs Association.

Tucson Fire Dept. Investigator Tom Quesnel died March 14, 2014, after battling leukemia, which he developed in the line of duty. He spent the last 20 years investigating nearly 3,000 fires throughout the Southwest, often with his beloved canine partners, Sully and Keda, by his side, according to TFD. He also worked closely with the Tucson Police Department. Quesnel joined TFD in 1989 and became an arson investigator in 1994.



John William Jennings, Jr., 66, Fire Marshal, Bedford County (VA) Fire & Rescue. After a five-month battle with work-related cancer, John died on February 16, 2015. He spent about 30 years as a fire investigator with the Lynchburg (VA) Fire Department before retiring and working part-time for BCoFR.



David Carrington "Chico" Creasy, Sr., 67, retired fire marshal for the Richmond (VA) Fire Department and retired senior battalion chief for the Chesterfield (VA) Fire Department died on October 15, 2018, after a two-year battle with work-related cancer.



Joshua MacDonald, 34, passed away unexpectedly due to health complications on April 17, 2020. Josh actively served the Berthoud Fire District (Colorado) from March 2013 to March 2016 in several capacities. In addition to a Wildland Firefighter and a Temporary Full Time Structural Firefighter, Josh served as a certified Fire Investigator. On Friday, March 25, 2016, Fire Investigator Macdonald responded to a reported structure fire on 2nd Street, Berthoud. During the cause and origin investigation, Fire Investigator MacDonald fell through the floor injuring his left knee. Following surgery on his knee, Josh contracted MRSA. Over the next four years Josh experienced several surgeries to include the amputations of his left leg from the knee down. After his long road of medical treatment, he succumbed to his injuries.



Stephen "Steve" Christopher Collins, 49, of Fort Worth, TX, died Sunday, October 4, 2020, from a valiantly fought, work-related brain cancer. He began his career with the Haltom City Fire Department in 1992 and joined the Fort Worth Fire Department in 1999, first serving on the Technical Rescue Team; then, in 2013, he joined the Bureau of Fire Investigation, where he served for the remainder of his career. He was a founding member of the fire department cancer task force, worked closely with the Moncrief Cancer Institute, and publicly shared his cancer journey.



Lemuel "DJ" Bruce, 44, a fire investigator with the Houston (TX) Fire Department was shot and killed by a suspected arsonist while on duty conducting surveillance at about 3:30 am on October 16, 2020.



David Scott "Scottie" Merritt, 54, Assistant Fire Marshal for the Durham (NC) Fire Department died on December 26, 2021, of work-related intestinal cancer. He was a long-time member of the IAAI NC chapter and was on the Fire-Arson Review Board for the NC Fire Rescue Commission.



Donald Gene Gross, 57, a fire investigator with the Lincoln (NE) Fire Department died on January 4, 2022. On January 3rd he was at the scene of a residential fire. After returning home, he complained of chest pains. On the morning of Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022, he was found deceased at his residence. He went to sleep on the couch watching TV with his dog, had a suspected heart attack and died.



Dewayne Fender, 57, a fire investigator with the Asheville (NC) Fire Department, died from occupational cancer January 8, 2022. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November 2020 and had served with the department since January 1994.



On Saturday, April 23, 2022, Fire Marshal Stephen Smith of the West Douglas County Fire Protection District (CO) responded to a residence after a 9-1-1 call reported that an electrical box had blown off the house. After the crew confirmed there were no injuries and no fire, the electrical utility company was notified to respond. Fire Marshal Smith returned to the station and went home. Minutes later, firefighters were dispatched to a medical emergency where they found Fire Marshal Smith unconscious in his car. Life-saving efforts were performed, and he was rushed to Castle Rock Hospital but could not be revived. He passed away from an apparent heart attack.



FDNY Supervising Fire Marshal George Snyder was on duty and investigated a fire on August 9, 2024. Within 24 hours of his duty, Supervising Fire Marshal Snyder suffered a fatal cardiovascular event. He died on August 10, 2024.



Shawn W. Johnson passed away on March 5, 2026, following a courageous two-year battle with cancer. Shawn served as a firefighter in many roles. He was a deputy fire marshal with the Minnetonka Fire Department, a testing evaluator with the Minnesota Fire Service Certification Board, second vice president with the Minnesota chapter of the International Association of Fire Investigators (MNIAAI), a former team supervisor with the Hennepin County Fire Investigations Team, and a former fire inspector for the Excelsior Fire District.



Fire Marshal Samir Ashmar of the Upper Macungie Township (PA) FD responded to an emergency medical incident that occurred at 1221hrs. on November 20, 2014. The incident concluded, and Fire Marshal Ashmar went about his day. At 1947 hrs., firefighters were called to Fire Marshal Ashmar's home; he was suffering a heart attack. He was treated and transported to the hospital but did not survive.



FDNY Fire Marshal Martin McHale had completed his work shift and was driving home. During the shift, Fire Marshal McHale investigated a fire in a high-rise building's stairwell. The investigation involved physically demanding activities at the fire scene, interviews with firefighters who responded to the incident, and filing related paperwork. McHale told fellow firefighters he was not feeling well before leaving his shift. As he drove home in his personal vehicle, Fire Marshal McHale suffered a heart attack. His vehicle left the roadway and struck a tree at low speed. He was wearing his seat belt. He was treated by responding firefighters and emergency medical workers, but he was not revived.

Fire Marshal Charles Waller of the Memphis (TX) FD returned to his office after inspecting and replacing smoke detectors at City Hall that morning. At approximately 1328 hours, an assistant chief discovered Fire Marshal Waller collapsed on the floor behind his desk. He was transported by ambulance to the hospital. Fire Marshal Waller was transferred to another hospital in Amarillo, and then to hospice care, where he died on February 25, 2012, at 1317 hours. The death was due to a Cerebral Vascular Accident (CVA).



Fire Marshal Stephen Cox of the South Davis Metro Fire Agency (UT) was at Fire Station 81 performing a mandatory annual firefighter skills fitness test. Towards the end of the skills test, Fire Marshal Cox was unable to stand on his own. Test evaluators stopped the test and sat him down in a chair, then, at his request, allowed him to lie down on the floor. Crews started medical treatment due to his breathing patterns and skin color. Fire Marshal Cox started to go unconscious. Firefighters placed him in an ambulance, which was located at the fire station, and transported him to a local hospital. While enroute to the hospital, Fire Marshal Cox suffered a heart attack. Fire Marshal Cox was treated in the emergency room and then placed in the intensive care unit. On August 27, 2011, due to his declining health, the hospital decided to transport Fire Marshal Cox to a regional hospital for further medical care. Despite these steps, Fire Marshal Cox died as a result of complications from a heart attack

Deputy Fire Marshal Ronald Wiley of the Richmond (CA) FD was returning to his office in his city vehicle after a meeting on July 2, 2007. While driving over the Carquinez Bridge, he was involved in a single-vehicle crash that caused a fire. Deputy Fire Marshal Wiley died in the crash.

Fire Marshal Roy Duhon of the Clute (TX) FD had been at a fire on the afternoon of October 26, 2003, had finished the investigation, and gone home. At that time, he complained of minor chest pain, but did not think anything of it. At or around 2000 hrs., he had a light heart attack, took a shower, and lay down. At 2200 hrs., he suffered another heart attack from which he did not recover.