



Vehicle crashes cause more firefighter deaths than fires, NFPA study finds

Last year more died in on-duty crashes than any year since 1977

June 9, 2004 - Firefighters are more likely to die traveling to or from a fire than fighting one, and motor vehicles pose a greater hazard than flames, according to new data from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). All told, 105 firefighters died while on duty in 2003, up from 97 in 2002, primarily because of last year's bad wildland-fire season.

Last year, 37 firefighters died while responding to or returning from alarms, while 29 died on the "fire ground" - the land or building where a fire occurs. That was the lowest number of firefighter deaths on the fire ground since NFPA began collecting the data in 1977, and the first time fire-ground deaths accounted for less than 30 percent of the total.

The NFPA's annual study of on-duty firefighters' deaths also found that 33 firefighters died in crashes in 2003 - more than in any other year since 1977.

In the most catastrophic incident, eight firefighters returning from a wildland fire were killed when their van crossed the center line while passing another vehicle and collided head-on with a tractor-trailer truck, bursting into flames. Alcohol was a factor in the crash.

Of the 37 firefighters who died traveling to or from an incident, 24 were involved in collisions or rollovers. Eight of those firefighters were not wearing seat belts and at least six were speeding.

For example, a firefighter driving to the fire station to respond to a flooding emergency hydroplaned and struck a signpost. He was driving too fast for the weather conditions and was not wearing a seat belt. In another fatal incident, the driver of a tanker lost control on a downhill curve, was thrown from the truck, and died when the truck rolled over him. Brake failure was a likely factor in the crash; and there were no seat belts in the vehicle.

"These data tell us that many firefighters' deaths are preventable," said Rita F. Fahy, manager of fire databases and systems for NFPA. "We owe it to the people

who bravely respond to emergencies to make sure they get there safely. That means, proper training and equipment, and adhering to standards. Obeying traffic laws, using seat belts, driving sober and controlling speeds would also dramatically reduce this awful toll."

NFPA has developed two standards to help fire departments establish safe-driving programs: NFPA 1002, [*Standard on Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator Professional Qualifications*](#) and NFPA 1451, [*Standard for a Fire Service Vehicle Operations Training Program*](#).

Stress and overexertion remained the leading cause of fatal injury in 2003, as they have been almost every year. Last year, 47 firefighters died from stress-induced heart attacks (including eight that occurred traveling to or from an incident). That's more than the 37 heart-attack deaths in 2002 and almost 10 percent more than the average of the past 10 years.

Eleven of the 47 heart-attack victims in 2003 were known to have heart problems (usually previous heart attacks or bypass surgery).

NFPA studies consistently find that about half the victims of fatal heart attacks had suffered previous heart attacks or undergone bypass surgery and an additional third had severe narrowing of the arteries. Comprehensive safety and health programs, such as those outlined in NFPA standards, could prevent such fatalities.

NFPA has been a worldwide leader in providing fire, electrical, building, and life safety to the public since 1896. The mission of the international nonprofit organization is to reduce the worldwide burden of fire and other hazards on the quality of life by providing and advocating scientifically-based consensus codes and standards, research, training and education. Visit NFPA's Web site at www.nfpa.org.

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