



# Firefighter Suicide Reporting

*November 30, 2021*

Fiscal Year 2021 Report to Congress



Homeland  
Security

*United States Fire Administration*

# Message from the U.S. Fire Administrator

November 30, 2021

The following report, “Firefighter Suicide Reporting,” has been prepared by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The document has been compiled pursuant to direction in the Joint Explanatory Statement, which accompanies the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260).

This report includes reviewed options available to the United States Fire Administration (USFA) and provides a recommended path forward.



Pursuant to congressional requirements, this report is being provided to the following Members of Congress:

The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard  
Chairwoman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Chuck Fleischmann  
Ranking Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Chris Murphy  
Chair, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito  
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

Inquiries relating to this report may be directed to the Acting U.S. Fire Administrator at (301) 447-1018 or to Richard Patrick, Director of the National Fire Programs Division, USFA, at (301) 447-1353.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lori Moore-Merrell". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Lori Moore-Merrell, DrPH, MPH  
U.S. Fire Administrator  
U.S. Fire Administration

# Executive Summary

In response to the Joint Explanatory Statement that accompanies the FY 2021 DHS Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260), USFA is providing information concerning the status of fulfilling the requirement to collect and maintain data concerning suicide rates of firefighters who are exposed repeatedly to certain types of trauma and to report on firefighter suicides. This report also includes a response from the FEMA Grant Programs Directorate concerning its ability to require Assistance to Firefighter Grant (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant applicants to submit firefighter suicide data within their applications.

Currently, the USFA On-Duty Firefighter Fatality Program (FFP) only captures and reports suicide data that is reported directly to the program by willing participants who are identified as on-duty. Since the inception of the FFP in the 1970s, only six firefighter suicides have been reported. Other organizations estimate that there are about 100 firefighter suicides annually, indicating the FFP is underreporting greatly firefighter suicides. The On-Duty FFP's information is obtained through voluntary notification by state, local, tribal, and territorial government entities, nongovernmental entities, and/or news media outlets. USFA makes direct contact with the fire department's chief or designee to obtain background and information to confirm the reported event. Once all the information is verified, it is entered into USFA's On-Duty Firefighter Fatality Database. All on-duty firefighter fatalities are reported to the Secretary of Homeland Security.

USFA continues to track, collect, and report the data of on-duty firefighter suicides as provided through available resources and within the existing limitations of the program. Presently, death certificates and autopsy reports are collected and reviewed by a contractor for all on-duty firefighter fatalities. As USFA starts reporting on all firefighter suicides, the reporting will be conducted similarly to the current on-duty firefighter fatality reporting procedures as identified in Section II of this report. The current ability to collect data on all firefighters who die by suicide is limited by a fire department's or family's willingness to report, the ability of the On-Duty FFP to support the increased data gathering and reporting, the lack of data source linkage, patient confidentiality, and the lack of a requirement to report in order to be able to collect and analyze accurate data. To maximize data reporting and gathering to the extent possible, USFA will increase outreach to fire departments and other fire service organizations to inform them that they should report all firefighter suicides to USFA.



# Firefighter Suicide Reporting

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# I. Legislative Language

The Joint Explanatory Statement that accompanies the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260) includes the following requirement:

There is currently no national data concerning suicide rates of firefighters who are repeatedly exposed to trauma that impacts their mental health and wellness. USFA is directed to collect and maintain such data and report on firefighter suicides. USFA shall update the Committees on the status of fulfilling this requirement within 90 days of the date of enactment of this Act. The report shall include an assessment of FEMA's ability to require reporting of firefighter suicide data in applications for Assistance to Firefighter Grants and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grants.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 166 Cong. Rec. H8312, H8479 (Dec. 21, 2020).

## II. Background

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) currently reports on-duty firefighter fatalities, which includes on-duty suicides. Since its inception in 1976, USFA has been notified of an on-duty firefighter fatality suicide when information regarding that fatality is reported. USFA's On-Duty Firefighter Fatality Program (FFP) has recorded six on-duty firefighter suicides. USFA's existing On-Duty FFP will continue to track, collect, and report data of on-duty firefighter suicides as reported to USFA.

To report and issue notifications on all on-duty firefighter fatalities, the subsequent process is followed:

- USFA is notified of each on-duty firefighter fatality when information regarding that fatality is reported by organizations such as State Fire Marshal offices, the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation (NFFF), local assistance state teams, news media outlets, nongovernmental organizations, or fire departments. USFA then contacts the chief or designee of the fire department with which the on-duty firefighter fatality occurred. During this initial contact, a member of USFA provides an introduction about the USFA program and explains the call's reference and intent. Information is gathered about the on-duty firefighter fatality, including verification that the incident was on-duty; the name, age, gender, rank, status, years of service, date and time of incident, and date of death of the firefighter; the fire department's name, address, and phone number; the name of the chief of the department; the point of contact's name and email address; and a description of what happened during the fatal incident.
- Although only six firefighter suicides have been reported since the inception of the On-Duty FFP in 1976, other organizations estimate that there are about 100 firefighter suicides annually, indicating that the On-Duty FFP is underreporting firefighter suicides greatly.
- Once the information about the on-duty firefighter fatality is gathered and verified, USFA enters the information into the On-Duty Firefighter Fatality Database, which results in the same information being posted to USFA's public website. An email listing all the information gathered then is sent out to representatives with organizations also involved with firefighter fatalities such as the NFFF, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Fire Protection Association.
- USFA uses GovDelivery, a web-based e-mail subscription management system that allows a member of the public to subscribe to news and information on the DHS websites. This subscription service further disseminates information on the fatality including a link to the USFA webpage where the fatality has been posted. Currently, more than 40,000 users are subscribed to receive on-duty firefighter fatality information via GovDelivery.

- The fatality information then is provided to USFA’s social media representative for posting to the USFA social media pages, such as Facebook and Twitter. An email also is sent to the affected fire department’s point of contact expressing condolences, notifying the contact on where the information has been posted, and briefly explaining the Public Safety Officer’s Benefit Program.
- Lastly, because of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, an email is sent to the USFA Webmaster listing the number of COVID-19-related on-duty firefighter fatalities in addition to the total number of on-duty firefighter fatalities. This information is noted in the weekly USFA Digest, which is disseminated through USFA’s News and Announcements List. Currently, there are 118,000 subscribers.

Notification of the on-duty firefighter fatality is provided to the Secretary of DHS, who then sends a condolence letter to the fire department.

In addition to USFA’s on-duty firefighter fatality reporting, two primary sources currently capture firefighter suicide data: the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA), and the CDC’s National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). While they do not report on suicides, other national-level service organizations, including the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the National Volunteer Fire Council, and the International Association of Fire Fighters, also may have an interest in learning more about firefighter suicides and how firefighting affects the behavioral health of firefighters.

As previously stated, USFA currently does not collect data on suicides that occur while off-duty. Obtaining accurate information on all firefighter suicides, including those that occurred while off-duty, will be a monumental task for USFA. Currently, because there is no requirement to report an on-duty firefighter fatality to USFA, USFA often seeks out the initial information on these fatalities. Because reporting on-duty fatalities or firefighter suicides to USFA is voluntary, some fire departments may be hesitant to provide information because of the stigma associated with suicide and patient confidentiality. Contacting the family of the victim may not be an option given the potential sensitivity of the situation. In addition, USFA may not be informed about these types of fatalities until well after they have occurred. Finally, the increased data gathering and reporting of all firefighter suicides would stretch the ability of the On-Duty FFP to support the existing program beyond the FFP’s current capabilities. As the USFA starts reporting on all firefighter suicides, it will do so similarly to the current on-duty firefighter fatality reporting procedures as described above.

Of noteworthy consideration, expanding the USFA On-Duty FFP also may leave it open to including other types of off-duty fatalities, such as cancer-related deaths. Policy decisions on these other deaths may have to be made in the future.

Finally, while not part of the current On-Duty FFP, USFA has the following related and notable research projects and initiatives that address firefighter mental wellness, and potentially may mitigate the incidence of firefighter suicide:

- USFA recently released the *Emergency Services Ergonomics and Wellness* handbook (<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/operations/ergonomics/>), which provides corrective measures that will help to: increase the health and safety of emergency responders, reduce the costs of worker's compensation claims, maximize the longevity of emergency service careers, and assist with sending personnel into healthy retirements. See Chapter 10 on Mental Wellness.
- USFA, in partnership with Women in Fire, released the *Emerging Health and Safety Issues Among Women in the Fire Service* report. Chapter 7 of this document discusses mental health and suicide among women firefighters.
- USFA, in partnership with the National Volunteer Fire Council, released the *Critical Health and Safety Issues in the Volunteer Fire Service* report. The report discusses behavioral health issues among the volunteer fire service, which represents approximately 70 percent of all firefighters in the United States.
- USFA also serves on the National Wildfire Coordinating Group Mental Health Subcommittee.
- In addition, the NFFF has a clearinghouse of information regarding firefighter mental wellness: <https://www.everyonegoeshome.com/16-initiatives/13-psychological-support/>. USFA has worked with the NFFF on these issues.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Grant Programs Directorate (GPD) is responsible for the oversight of the Assistance to Firefighter Grant (AFG) and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) programs. GPD reviewed the feasibility of adding requirements for grant applicants to submit firefighter suicide data within their applications. Given the minimal effort to incorporate the change, GPD will add data points to the FY 2021 AFG/SAFER applications, which already collect injury and fatality data from fire departments.



### III. Analysis/Discussion

As mentioned above, FEMA will incorporate the collection of firefighter suicide data in the FY 2021 AFG and SAFER grant applications. It is important to note that FEMA receives approximately 8,500 applications for AFG/SAFER applications each year, while there are 27,199 fire departments listed in the National Fire Department Registry.

Although USFA collects data on-duty firefighter fatalities, which includes reported on-duty related suicides, this data is limited to the voluntary submission of information by the affected fire department.

According to the Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders (April 2018 – Link: [White Paper](#)), the suicide rate for firefighters/emergency medical service is 18 per 100,000, while the suicide rate for law enforcement is 11-17 per 100,000. The data for firefighters is drawn from the FBHA (<https://www.ffbha.org/>), and is extrapolated from there. The data on law enforcement suicides is from the Badge of Life (<https://badgeoflife.org/>).

FBHA and CDC NVDRS report different numbers. Per the Ruderman White Paper, FBHA reported a suicide rate for firefighters of 18/100,000 compared to 13/100,000 for the general population. The CDC NVDRS report showed a suicide rate for male firefighters of 21.7/100,000 compared to 27.4/100,000 for male working persons aged 16-64 (2016 data - [Suicide Rates by Industry and Occupation — National Violent Death Reporting System, 32 States, 2016 | MMWR \(cdc.gov\)](#)).

The difference between the two numbers (18/100,000 versus 21.7/100,000) could be explained partially by the fact that the FBHA suicide rate is for all firefighters, regardless of gender, and the CDC suicide rate is only reflective of male firefighters. The suicide rate for the general population (males and females of all ages) in 2018 was 14.2/100,000. The rate for men of all ages was 22.8, and for men ages 25-44, it was 27.7, very close to what CDC reports as the rate for men working in all occupations (27.4).

CDC showed that male firefighters had a lower suicide rate than that of male police officers, correctional officers, and paramedics. Gathering information and reporting on these deaths may provide insight into an additional cause of the loss of firefighters and the impact of firefighting on the mental health of firefighters in the United States.

USFA's current On-Duty FFP is an effective method to collect and report on-duty firefighter fatalities accurately (subject to the above note that it relies on voluntary submissions). To meet the direction from the Joint Explanatory Statement the program would need to expand to include all firefighter suicides. Presently however, death certificates, autopsy reports, etc., are collected and reviewed by a contractor for all on-duty firefighter fatalities. For USFA to collect and review the documents related to all firefighter suicides, a full policy and legal review would be necessary to determine whether it is an appropriate action for USFA, FEMA, and DHS to take. If determined appropriate, a similar process could be incorporated into the collection of off-duty firefighter suicide-related documents. The current FFP program is limited in its ability to

execute the all-inclusive firefighter suicide reporting program effectively as directed by the Joint Explanatory Statement.

## IV. Conclusion/DHS Action Plan

The current capabilities of the On-Duty FFP are the extent to which USFA can meet this congressional direction. USFA will increase its current outreach to fire departments and other fire service organizations to communicate the direction to report off-duty firefighter suicides, and will build partnerships with government and nongovernment organizations that currently gather information on firefighter suicides to share information and to collect data. Before fully proceeding, however, full policy and legal reviews are required to determine whether collection and review of documentation, similar to that of the On-Duty FFP, is an appropriate action for USFA, FEMA, and DHS to take and whether the resources are available to collect, review, and report accurately on this information.

Execution of the defined resourced firefighter suicide reporting program could be operational in FY 2025 but would require additional information technology capabilities/approvals, funding, and staff.

Separate from USFA's On-Duty FFP, FEMA GPD will require AFG and SAFER grant applicants to submit firefighter suicide data within their applications. USFA also will explore other federal grants used by the fire service that could include similar stipulations.

## V. Appendix – List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AFG	Assistance to Firefighter Grant
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FBHA	Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FFP	Firefighter Fatality Program
FY	Fiscal Year
GPD	Grant Programs Directorate
NFFF	National Fallen Firefighter Foundation
NVDRS	National Violent Death Reporting System
SAFER	Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response
USFA	United States Fire Administration