

Report: Fewer resources mean greater risks for firefighters

By Associated Press

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BOSTON - Most firefighters who died fighting fires in recent years were working under substandard conditions - arriving too late and without enough help or resources, according to a Boston Globe analysis published Monday.

And most were entering burning buildings where there was no one inside to save.

The newspaper examined federal investigative reports from 52 fires around the country that killed 80 firefighters between 1997 and 2004.

The Globe found that in just 35 of the 52 fires, departments were able to get one firefighter to the scene within 6 minutes.

In 27 of the fires, four firefighters were able to get to the scene within 6 minutes, the minimum force recommended by the National Fire Protection Association.

The manpower standard for safe and effective work at a building fire - 15 firefighters arriving within 10 minutes - was met in only 18 of the fires.

In 14 of the 52 fires, there was a suspicion that someone might be inside the burning buildings. In only six of fires was there actually anyone inside.

The deaths studied did not include those from heart attacks or motor vehicle accidents. The incidents involved a mix of volunteer and career fire departments in cities like New York and Memphis, as well as small towns.

Some fire chiefs questioned whether they should stop sending firefighters into burning buildings if they can't there soon enough and with enough people to do the job safely.

"We're a can-do organization. We give it the old college try," said Chief Ronald J. Siarnicki, former chief in Prince George's County, Md., who keeps count of line-of-duty deaths as executive director of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

"But maybe we need to stop accepting a five-person crew to cover an entire town. Maybe we need to say, 'We don't have the resources to do this job.' We're losing firefighters, and there are so many near misses," he told the Globe.

The number of fires in the United States has declined sharply, but the number of firefighter deaths are steady at about 100 per year, not including Sept. 11. More than half of those deaths were from heart attacks and motor vehicle accidents.

Each death is unique, but delays and low staffing add to the risk, said Vincent Dunn, a retired New York City deputy fire chief who examined the Globe's findings.

"The more firefighters you have, the faster you can put out the fire," he said. "Chances of a firefighter's death increase the longer a fire burns."

In Massachusetts, the firefighters' union estimates the state has lost about 1,000 out of 13,000 firefighters since 1981. That's when a state law took effect known as Proposition 2, which limits property tax increases.

During that time, the population has increased and departments have taken on added duties such as ambulance calls.

The number of full-time firefighters nationwide is essentially unchanged, but the volume of emergency calls has doubled.

Other hazards identified by the Globe include shortages of equipment, such as self-contained breathing apparatus, and use of risky tactics beyond the capacity of small departments. There is also a lack of available backup for weary fire crews, something federal investigators warned of after the 1999 fire that killed six Worcester firefighters.

It was lack of survivor benefits that drew national attention to the 2003 death of part-time firefighter Martin McNamara. Voters in Lancaster, the town where he died, later rejected a tax increase to raise \$650,000 in pension funding for his family.

A legislative committee is working on a bill to require death benefits for volunteer firefighters, but there is no move to set state requirements for equipment, staffing or training.

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