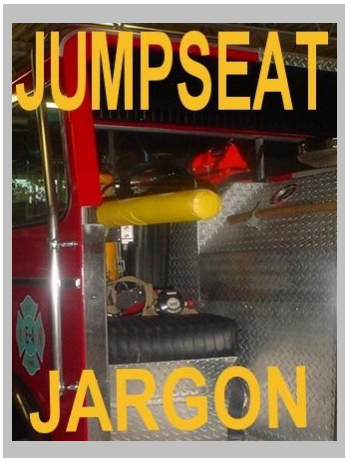

One!

93 firefighters are listed as on-duty deaths for 2017, up over the past five years, yet only one firefighter was killed inside a burning structure.

As of New Year's Day, it has been 228 days since the U.S. fire service experienced an on-duty death where a firefighter was killed while inside a burning structure. On 18 May San Antonio firefighter Scott Deem was killed and two other firefighters injured while searching a gym in a burning strip mall for possible occupants. Fire conditions worsened causing a collapse that trapped Firefighter Deem. His death was the 40th on-duty death of the year as recorded by the United Stated Fire Administration (USFA). Since then there have been 52 additional firefighter fatalities. What does this significant milestone tell us about our fatality data? It tells us several things. First, our data definitions are a wide net that is set up to catch fatality information on a broad scale. Second, it considers the idea that we are operating, in general, better than in previous years as the number of firefighters killed while directly fighting fire (advancing hose lines, searching, ventilating) has been declining. Finally, it tells us that the facts run in direct contrast to the false notions regarding firefighter fatalities that are used to promote a presentation, cited incorrectly in an article, and tossed about as evidence in counter arguments in discussions both in person and online.

Running Lines, Searching, Opening Up

12 firefighters are listed as having died on-duty deaths in 2017 while advancing hose lines. Take away those related to wildfire and we are left with eight. Not one of the eight involved a firefighter being stricken while operating inside a burning structure. In fact, of those eight, three each passed away a day after the incident due to complications of their injuries. One of these involved a live fire training.

The activity type Ventilation only saw one fatality, that of a firefighter killed when he fell from the bucket of a tower ladder while accessing the roof of residential structure during a fire. Likewise, the number killed while performing a search is equally low. Along with the fatality in Texas mentioned at the start, a Michigan firefighter suffered cardiac arrest while participating in department training. So, of the 93 on-duty deaths to date, only two (if we count the fall from the tower ladder) were directly involved in firefighting operations as previously defined. That's extremely significant when compared to previous years. What should be concerning though are the other 91 deaths and how they died, as well as why they are counted. These deaths range from falling ill a day after responding to an emergency call to having been struck by a privately-owned vehicle driven by an intoxicated firefighter.

This isn't the lowest total number of firefighter fatalities in the past five years, but it is part of downward trend. It is also a downward trend in the number of firefighters killed by fire behavior and building collapse.

2016 Advancing Hoseline (excluding wildfire) Inside a Structure: 2
2015 Advancing Hoseline (excluding wildfire) Inside a Structure: 4
2014 Advancing Hoseline (excluding wildfire) Inside a Structure: 9*
2013 Advancing Hoseline (excluding wildfire) Inside a Structure: 9**
2012 Advancing Hoseline (excluding wildfire) Inside a Structure: 4

*Two multi-fatality incidents **Five killed in one multi-fatality incident

2016 Search Inside a Structure: 2*

2015 Search Inside a Structure: 2
2014 Search Inside a Structure: 2**
2013 Search Inside a Structure: 4***
2012 Search Inside a Structure: 0

*One multi-fatality incident **One killed in a fire in his residence ***Victim killed in fire near residence; reported to scene without PPE

2016 Ventilation Due to Collapse: 0
2015 Ventilation Due to Collapse: 1*
2014 Ventilation Due to Collapse: 0
2013 Ventilation Due to Collapse: 1**

2012 Ventilation Due to Collapse: 0

*Victim fell through skylight during investigation **Victim fell from roof of exposure through roof of burning structure

Are We Truly Dying 'On Average'?

Some may still say and write that 100 firefighters die each year in the line of duty, and mathematically that may be correct, but the reality of that saying stops with the math. Our on-duty deaths are declining and declining in the areas where our highest performance is expected. That does not lessen the reality of the dangers and risks present but it does call into question the efforts and attention (or lack thereof) in reducing the majority our on-duty deaths. 2017 went as the years before it ended, with most the names of the fallen having succumbed to heart attacks, stress and overexertion. Fatalities involving vehicles (while operating, riding or struck by) have become second with lack of seat belt use taking a stand this year (three firefighters were killed, ejected from the vehicle they were in).

All On-Duty Deaths Are Not Equal

Our challenge now is to continue to operate in ways that keep the interior firefighting fatality number low, without compromising the local mission, and consider how the data from the other fatalities is 'statistically relevant'. Along with the nationwide push to reduce deaths related to cancer and suicide, we need to pick up most of our on-duty deaths and marry their reduction efforts to the currently popular topics. As we will learn from fatality investigation reports yet released, most fire departments and firefighters are neglecting physical health despite the known physical demands.

2017 ended with a rise in fatalities compared to past years. However, the rise was not due to firefighters killed inside burning structures. As we look forward through this year we must seriously ask if we are truly concerned about reducing the other fatalities and what steps, revised, renewed or brand new, need to be taken.

Bill Carey is the online news/blog manager for PennWell Public Safety, which publishes FirefighterNation.com and JEMS.com and their respective print publications. He blogs at BackstepFirefighter.com and is a former volunteer lieutenant with the Hyattsville Volunteer Fire Department in Prince George's County, Md.