



The Newsletter of the New Jersey  
Division of Fire Safety

# **FIRE FOCUS**



Excellence in Public Safety

## **NJDFS's Award-Winning Fire Investigation Unit Celebrates 20th Anniversary**

In 2003, the NJ Division of Fire Safety sought to take a more active role in performing fire investigations in State properties and municipalities where it serves as the Fire Official. Twenty years later, the Fire Investigation / K-9 Unit is recognized statewide, having performed over 4,500 investigations.



Arson Unit, 2004 (L-to-R): Rod Meyer, K-9 Taz, Jason Spiecker, Stephen Letts, K-9 Hunter, Chris Eckert, Jeff Silver, and K-9 Scout.

A year into its existence, the Unit expanded to include a much-needed investigative resource: Ignitable Liquid Detection K-9s. Previously, there were only a handful of these specialty K-9 teams in the entire state to support fire investigators. The first NJDFS K-9s were Labrador Retrievers from Belarus, who trained alongside their handlers for 400+ hours to become certified to the NJ Attorney General guidelines. There have been a total of ten K-9s throughout the years, including ones that were cross-trained for Tobacco Detection and Cadaver Detection.

Today, the NJ Division of Fire Safety's K-9s are certified to detect approximately 30 ignitable liquids in both raw and burned stages. The Fire Investigation / K-9 Unit also provides fire officials with CEU training in "Ignitable Liquids Detection K-9s," "The Scientific Method," and assists the NJ-International Association of Arson Investigators, NJ Division of Criminal Justice Academy, and NJ Forest Fire Service with specialized fire investigation instruction.

Throughout the years, the Fire Investigation / K-9 Unit has become busier and busier. In the beginning, the Unit performed approximately 150 investigations per year. The Unit now does more than 350 annually. Hundreds of these cases have been deemed "arson" with the help of the K-9s. (cont.)



## Excellence in Public Safety

# NJDFS's Award-Winning Fire Investigations Unit Celebrates 20th Anniversary - (cont.)

As a statewide agency, the Unit has the unique opportunity to investigate all types of fires in all areas. They have become a primary member of many County Fire Investigation Taskforces, and have other notable partnerships with the NJ Forest Fire Service and US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. In 2018, they assumed more fire investigative duties for NJ State Police jurisdictions, including marine fires. The K-9 Teams have worked high-profile events, including the Miss America Pageant and Super Bowl XLVIII at MetLife Stadium.

NJDFS Investigators have provided depositions and expert courtroom testimony for dozens of cases across New Jersey leading to many successful prosecutions for arson, murder, gang/drug activity, domestic terrorism, and other heinous crimes. All of this has been accomplished with only a handful of personnel, whose dedication and expertise in their field - on a 24/7/365 basis - is unmatched.

The Fire Investigation / K-9 Unit has received numerous accolades for their work throughout the years: NJ-IAAI Unit of the Year (2013), the NJ DCA's "Team of Excellence" Award (2022), and most recently the NJ-IAAI President's Award (2023).



NJDFS Arson Unit Accepts the NJ-IAAI President's Award, 2023  
(L-to-R): Braulio Villegas, Stephen Letts, Jason Spiecker, Joseph Jackson, NJ-IAAI President James Varick, Rod Meyer, and Walt Zieser.



Assistant Commissioner Kim Holmes (left) and Deputy Commissioner Rob Long (right) join Division of Fire Safety Director and State Fire Marshal Rich Mikutsky (center) to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Fire Investigation / K-9 Unit.



## Excellence in Public Safety

# NEW JERSEY STATE FIRE MARSHAL MESSAGE



The NJ Division of Fire Safety continues to underline the importance of lithium-ion battery safety, which has rapidly emerged as a concern of the fire service. Fire officials across the country have been warning of the dangers for several years now.

In the case of electric vehicles (EVs), this technology is constantly evolving, and so must codes, standards, training, research, and other resources. The ever-growing presence of lithium-ion batteries in our daily lives are changing the fire characteristics of our environment. Firefighters need to be able to stay on top of these changes to ensure the safety of life and property.

Lithium-ion batteries offer many advantages, but also have disadvantages. One of which is sensitivity to high temperatures. When a cell reaches temperatures over 158 degrees Fahrenheit, uncontrolled self-ignition can occur lasting longer and generating more energy/heat than basic fires. Safety is especially critical in the case of quick charging, where the voltage is higher and batteries generate much more heat. In most cases it is the batteries that can be the source of a potential fire. Batteries must be charged and used safely. The lithium-ion (or similar) batteries inside of EV's fail and burn in a much different way than internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles.

Compared with Internal Combustion Engine vehicle fires, EV vehicle fires are less common but much more complicated to extinguish. Electric Vehicle fires burn longer, produce extremely toxic smoke, and have the potential for electrical shock and reignition hours after extinguishment. While many vehicle fires occur on the road, it's the fires that occur in parking structures that could present extinguishment difficulties as well as the potential for large economic loss.

A hot topic of concern is electric vehicles and charging stations within parking garages. The hazards associated with this present a much greater concern for fire and the ability to safely control and extinguish a fire.

While events concerning lithium-ion battery and EV fires are relatively new to the fire service, the Division of Fire Safety has already sponsored several live and online training sessions from various entities on these types of fires. We are also currently working with several fire service instructors through our partners at Kean University as we continue to develop training programs to adapt to this ever-changing situation.

Stay safe.

State Fire Marshal Richard J. Mikutsky



## Excellence in Public Safety



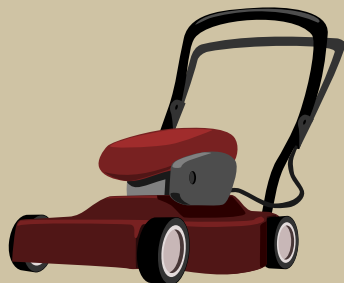
# SPRING FIRE SAFETY



As the seasons change here in New Jersey, so do the hazards that could potentially cause fires. Here are some tips that your Fire Department or Fire Prevention Bureau can promote in your towns this spring season.

### Spring Cleaning

- \*Properly store household chemicals. Never mix cleaning agents.**
- \*Dispose of old newspapers, magazines, and junkmail. They can pile up and increase the severity/spread of a potential fire.**
- \*Clean out dryer vents and be sure exhaust pipes are clear.**



### Yardwork Returns

- \*Remove dead vegetation and other flammable materials, especially within 5 feet of the home.**
- \*Keep gasoline in its proper container. Never bring it indoors.**
- \*Carefully dispose of rags with oil-based paints or stains. Do not leave them in a pile.**

### Grilling Safety

- \*Inspect grill carefully and make sure it's free of grease or fat buildup. Clear out any nests, spider webs, and debris.**
- \*For gas grills, check the hoses for leaks or damage prior to the first time using it each year.**



As with all seasons focus on having and practicing fire escape plans and stress the importance of having working smoke alarms in the home.

Keep messages of fire safety growing in the Garden State this spring!







## Excellence in Public Safety

# **NEW JERSEY DIVISION OF FIRE SAFETY CELEBRATES** **25 YEARS OF SAVING LIVES WITH ABC-7**

On February 1, 2023, representatives from the New Jersey Division of Fire Safety traveled into New York City to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Operation-7 Save-a-Life program. In what has become a yearly tradition, public service and private industry came together from around the Tri-State Area in the name of fire safety.

Spearheaded by WABC Channel 7 in New York, the Operation-7 Save-a-Life Campaign's mission is to save lives by providing smoke alarms to our area's most at-risk citizens.



**NJ State Fire Marshal Rich Mikutsky Presents WABC News Anchor Bill Ritter with a NJ State Fire Marshal Helmet to Commemorate 25 Years of the Operation-7 Save-a-Life Program**

"Over the years, New Jersey has had one of the lowest fire death rates in the nation, falling far below the national average," said State Fire Marshal Rich Mikutsky. "Given New Jersey's demographics, dense population and older housing stock, the low fire-death rate is particularly impressive. And all of this comes back to sound fire code enforcement, public fire safety education, and programs like Operation Save-a-Life."

This year, the New Jersey Division of Fire Safety will concentrate on issuing smoke alarms to the two most vulnerable segments of the population – senior citizens and children. Throughout the program's 25 years, over 200,000 smoke alarms have been distributed in the State of New Jersey alone. Thanks to the Operation-7 Save-a-Life sponsors – Kidde, Home Depot, and Toyota – the NJDFS has been able to support fire departments statewide with these life-saving devices.

"We would like to thank all the program's sponsors and encourage them to continue to strongly support the mission of Operation Save-a-Life," added State Fire Marshal Mikutsky. "There is no doubt in my mind that numerous lives have been saved because of this program over the past 25 years. So let's work together on keeping our friends, loved ones, and neighbors protected for the next 25."

New Jersey Division of Fire Safety and Kean University present:

# Homeland Security and Fire Safety Conference June 6, 2023



## BACK TO BASICS

Kean University  
STEM Building, 1075 Morris Ave  
Union, NJ 07083



- \*8 A.M. Check-in and Breakfast
- \*Multiple Agency Speakers
- \*Attendees will receive .5 Technical CEU  
(Code Enforcement, Instructor & Investigator)
- \*Registration and details at:  
[www.keanfiresafety.com](http://www.keanfiresafety.com)

### Confirmed Speakers:

#### **Ronald E. Kanterman**

Executive Inspector, FDNY - Bureau of Fire  
Prevention

#### **Paul Rogers**

Lieutenant, New York City Fire Dept. (Ret.),  
Energy Safety Response Group

#### **Thomas Dunne**

Deputy Chief, New York City Fire Dept.

**Registration begins April 24th online at  
[www.keanfiresafety.com](http://www.keanfiresafety.com)**





# SAVING LIVES IS STRESSFUL!

We've Been Where You Are . . .  
Now We're Here For **You**



We get it. The work is stressful and life can get overwhelming. Talk confidentially to a trained peer support specialist who has had similar experiences as a firefighter, dispatcher, or EMS professional. **NJ Fire & EMS Lifeline** is a 24/7 confidential peer support service for New Jersey Firefighters, Dispatchers and Emergency Medical Services Personnel and their families. We offer the following services:

- ✓ **PEER SUPPORT:** telephonic peer counseling, support and clinical assessment
- ✓ **CRITICAL INCIDENT CRISIS MANAGEMENT:** peer-based critical incident stress management (CISM) services available throughout New Jersey
- ✓ **TRAINING:** Resilience and wellness prevention training available to all fire, dispatch and EMS agencies upon request
- ✓ **PROVIDER NETWORK & RESOURCES:** access to providers who are familiar with the unique culture of fire, dispatch and EMS professions

Talk to us and find out more about our **free** and **confidential** services.

**888.653.3367 | NJFIREEMS.com |**







## Excellence in Public Safety

# You're invited! **FireStat**

***Every 1st & 3rd Wednesday 9:15a***

**If interested in attending please contact  
Capt. Ben Berkman: [Bennet.Berkman@dca.nj.gov](mailto:Bennet.Berkman@dca.nj.gov)**

**The purpose of FireStat is to create a single, reliable one-stop fire information sharing platform**

**Log in to hear:**

- \*Discussions regarding current topics, trends & patterns**
- \*Presentations on current/pressing topics**
- \*Earn FREE CEUs**



**FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM!**  
**[NJ\\_FIRESAFETY](#)**



**The Public Education Advisory Council is in search of new members to work on fire safety education initiatives throughout New Jersey.**

**If you are interested in serving, please contact NJ Fire Safety Commissioner Paul McGrath - [paul@cityfire.com](mailto:paul@cityfire.com)**





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Smoke/CO Alarm Distribution

Youth Firesetter Programs

NJDFS F.I.R.E. Bowl

NJ Fire Safety Commission

NJDFS/ NJFPPA Poster Contest

NJDFS Fire Focus Quarterly

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