

Texas Firefighter Wellness Newsletter

How Texas Firefighters Survived a Late Winter Snowpocalypse



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Winter Storm Uri hit North America, Northern Mexico, and parts of Canada from February 13th through the 17th. On a local level in Texas, the communities affected had truly never experienced a winter storm of this capacity. The storm resulted in a week-long cycle of snow falling, icing, melting, and freezing over. Many cities were virtually impossible to navigate, with roads unable to be maneuvered due to the consistent presence of ice. Many emergency professionals were still needed, namely firefighters, due to the increased demand for resources resulting from power outages and water shortages.

Fort Worth Fire Chief Jim Davis and San Antonio Fire Chief Charles Hood shared challenges they faced and how they overcame difficulties during this unprecedented time. Because Chief Davis is originally from Columbus, OH, he is accustomed to the severity of this weather, but the infrastructure in Texas simply is not built to withstand these conditions. Both chiefs added that on the flip side, the Texas infrastructure is able to handle triple-digit temperatures and withstand humidity, but it is incapable of weathering the low temperatures, severe ice, and snow that were experienced mid-February.

Chief Hood added that on average, they typically receive one or two active fire calls a day, but merely a couple days into the storm, they had received 38 active structure fire calls. In Fort Worth, Davis noted their departments usually respond to 300-350 runs a day, but during the winter storm, they were averaging 2,100-2,200 runs. Not only was the demand for firefighters increased, but conditions made it significantly more difficult to provide the level of assistance they would under normal conditions. This resulted in noticeably slower response times, freezing hoses, and potential power outages and water shortages. Davis detailed that the blackouts became "sustained, not rolling" and about 30 percent of the community was without stable water or electricity for a week.

Chief Hood explained that in San Antonio, they received a large influx of calls from residents that were unable to receive oxygen from the companies that typically serviced them. Hood mobilized his department, and within a matter of days, they were able to drop off 300 oxygen bottles. He believes this really did directly save lives, as it removed the challenge for many people that are oxygen dependent.

While still serving the community, Chief Davis also utilized these hardships as learning opportunities for his

crew. He taught several techniques from his time in Ohio, such as draining the water from the hose after use, so it does not freeze while not in use. Davis shared he has great pride for the creativity and flexibility of his team during this difficult time.

Naturally, the cold weather plans are being revised for departments across the state after Winter Storm Uri, but both Chief Hood and Chief Davis plan on meeting with fire chiefs from all over the state to compare what was most beneficial for each department during the storm. Davis even suggested an exchange program between departments across the nation, where firefighters from the Texas departments could go to a department in the Midwest to experience a severe winter and learn applicable techniques. Those departments would then send firefighters to Texas during an extreme summer to learn effective methods for dealing with the opposite end of the climate spectrum. Davis anticipates extreme weather like this will likely become more frequent and aims to prepare his department in the best way possible.

<https://www.firehouse.com/operations-training/news/21216155/how-tx-firefighters-survived-a-late-winter-snowpocalypse>

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What's New at the WRI?

The WRI welcomes a new research assistant and a new therapist!

Jordan Smith

Jordan joined the WRI in February 2021 as a Clinical Research Assistant. She graduated from Baylor University with a Bachelor of Science in Public Health in May 2019 and is completing her Master of Public Health in Epidemiology degree. In her time at Baylor University, she worked closely with the Department of Public Health and the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences studying topics including physical activity among adults with functional limitations, exercise prescriptions through the Family Health Center, and firefighter exposure to carcinogens through occupational risks.

Jordan plans to pursue a Doctorate in Epidemiology in order to further study firefighters' occupational risks. Her experience with firefighters, both personally through her family and professionally through her work, has inspired her to find a solution to the ever-growing problem of firefighter cancer. In her free time, Jordan enjoys hiking, running, country dancing, baking, and spending time with her niece and nephews.

Rudney Danquah

Rudney joined the WRI team in September of 2020. She received her B.S. in Psychology with a minor in Sociology from Virginia Tech in 2015 and her M.Ed. in Professional Counseling from the University of Oklahoma in 2017. She is currently a fourth-year doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at Texas A&M University. Prior to joining WRI, Rudney has provided counseling for children with a history of trauma and in different settings such as community mental health, university counseling and with veteran's affairs. Her clinical interests include trauma recovery and working with underserved populations. She enjoys watching reruns of the Golden Girls and completing jigsaw puzzles and sudoku in her spare time.

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