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32nd Annual Firefighter of the Year Awards

Award Recipients and Incident Summaries by Department

Massachusetts Department of Fire Services

Stephen D. Coan Fire Marshal's Award: Public Information Officer (Retired) Jennifer Mieth

- Jennifer Mieth has been at the forefront of the Commonwealth's fire and life safety education efforts for nearly 40 years. She started at the State Fire Marshal's office in 1984 as a research analyst, where one of her jobs was to update the fatal fire log – a duty that revealed to her, over and over again, the tragic toll that fire takes on families, communities, and especially children. Determined to tackle the problem, she went on to create the Fire Data & Public Education Unit, recruited a task force of fire educators, and developed the training that made them welcome guests in Massachusetts classrooms. She managed the Student Awareness of Fire Education program, which helped drive child fire deaths down from an average of 22 per year in the early '90s to zero for more than two and a half years running, the longest period in Massachusetts history. And later, as the Department of Fire Services' Public Information Officer, she earned a reputation as a reliable, accessible, and accurate source of information who was always ready to tap her deep well of knowledge for reporters, educators, fire chiefs, and her fellow public safety PIOs. No matter the topic or fact pattern, she always found a way to work a heartfelt safety message into her responses, promoting fire education through news coverage until her retirement this past summer. Throughout it all, she remained a steadfast supporter of firefighters in all the facets of their work, and a cherished member of the fire service community.

Attleboro Fire Department

Individual Meritorious Conduct Award: Firefighter/Paramedic Nicholas W. Sheehan

- On June 6, 2020, Firefighter/Paramedic Nicholas Sheehan was traveling home with his three young daughters when he witnessed the aftermath of a high-speed single-vehicle crash. After pulling over and telling his children that he was going to check on the driver, Firefighter/Paramedic Sheehan found the man unconscious and leaning across the center console with no seat belt. Without the benefit of protective gear, he reached through the shattered glass, opened the door to gain entry, and assessed the driver, who was severely injured and barely breathing with no pulse. He extricated the man with a bystander's assistance and performed chest compressions while neighbors called 911. He continued to render aid until Attleboro firefighters transported the driver to the hospital.

Brewster Fire Department

Individual Meritorious Conduct Award: Firefighter/Paramedic Gretchen Riley

- On March 17, 2021, Firefighter/Paramedic Gretchen Riley was returning to headquarters when she was one of the first on scene at a serious motor vehicle collision involving a tractor trailer. The truck was on fire with the driver trapped inside. With no time to don her protective gear, Firefighter/Paramedic Riley immediately retrieved a fire extinguisher and medical bag from her department vehicle and extinguished a large area of the growing fire. She then worked with West Barnstable firefighters and an off-duty firefighter to extricate the driver and provide medical assistance until he could be transported from the scene.

Brockton Fire Department

Group Meritorious Conduct Award: Lieutenant Benjamin Denny, Lieutenant James W. DuBeau Jr., Firefighter Christian Bugbee, Firefighter Paul Jones, Firefighter Corey Lacey, Firefighter Edward J. Lee III, Firefighter Robert Orcutt, and Firefighter Alexander Warren

- On the morning of October 20, 2020, the Brockton Fire Department responded to a three-family home with smoke showing from the basement and occupants trapped on the third floor. Squad A immediately went to work stretching a line into the basement. Lieutenant DuBeau and Firefighter Warren entered the house without the protection of a hose line, meeting heavy smoke and obstructions on their way to the third floor. Outside, Firefighters Lacey and Lee raised a 28-foot ground ladder, ultimately rescuing two children through the third-floor window and bringing them down the ground ladder to safety. Firefighters Bugbee and Orcutt removed two more people from the third floor and into the ladder truck bucket with the assistance of Lieutenant Denny and Firefighter Jones. In total, three children and one adult were rescued from the two-alarm fire – and none needed follow-up medical attention.

Carver Fire Department

Medal of Valor: Lieutenant Christopher J. Mahoney

- On the night of July 19, 2020, the Carver Fire Department responded to a frantic call for help from a woman trapped on the second floor of her home by a raging fire. Flames were shooting from the first-floor windows below and thick black smoke was pushing through the windows above her head. She was in desperate need of help as dozens of the call/volunteer fire department's personnel started to arrive on-scene, supported by police and EMS. A neighbor had positioned a ladder on the side of the house but was pushed back by the smoke and unable to reach the woman. On-call Firefighter Christopher Mahoney, now a Lieutenant, was first on scene. He scaled the ladder, which fell short of

the window, and made a first attempt to convince the woman to exit immediately. Heavy smoke filled the house, and the woman was trapped inside her bedroom but afraid to climb through the window and down to the ladder. As officers used a garden hose and fire extinguisher to hold back the flames, Lieutenant Mahoney was able to make his way up the ladder a second time. On this attempt, he got a good hold of the woman and was able to pull her onto the ladder head-first to safety. After she was in EMS care, firefighters were able to knock down the fire – and also save two pets from the home.

Dartmouth Fire District 1

Group Meritorious Conduct Award: Captain Ryan Cabral and Lieutenant Ryan P. Snell

Members of Dartmouth Fire District 1 responded to provide mutual aid to District 2 on the morning of December 28, 2020. They found a single-family home fully engulfed in fire and learned that the elderly homeowner might still be in the home. Captain Cabral and Lieutenant Snell conducted a rapid interior search for the woman as crews continued to battle the fire. Combating heavy smoke and flames, they made their way through deteriorating conditions and into the rear bedroom, where they found the homeowner on the floor unconscious. To ensure the fastest possible medical assistance, they notified Command of where they'd be coming out of the building and brought her to waiting EMTs. She was treated and transported to a local hospital for stabilization and preparation for MedFlight. The building suffered massive damage, but thankfully the woman survived.

Harwich Fire Department

Individual Meritorious Conduct Award: Firefighter Josh Ford

- Harwich Firefighter Josh Ford was off duty on November 20, 2020, and traveling on Route 6 when he saw a car on fire. He stopped to assist and approached the vehicle. The gas tank had ruptured, and fire was coming out from underneath the car. Seeing the driver trapped by fire on the driver's side, Firefighter Ford and a bystander grabbed the tire iron from the trunk of the vehicle and broke a rear window to gain access to the passenger compartment. With no personal protective gear and despite the danger to himself, he was still able to help the driver out of the burning car and to safety. While the Harwich Fire Department extinguished the fire, the driver was transported to Cape Cod Hospital and survived his injuries.

Kingston Fire Department

Individual Meritorious Conduct Award: Firefighter/EMT Christopher J. Veracka

- In the early morning hours of July 6, 2020, Firefighter Christopher Veracka woke to the sounds of smoke alarms and people shouting. The house right next door, occupied by his wife's family, was on fire. He immediately left the safety of his home and, defying the danger to himself, entered the burning building without any protective gear. He soon found his wife's 94-year-old uncle in the room that was on fire. The man was on the ground, unable to get up or escape the danger. Firefighter Veracka was helped the man to his feet and carried him from the burning room, saving him from the heat and heavy smoke. He then re-entered the home to check for other occupants before knocking down most of the fire with a fire extinguisher.

Lynnfield Fire Department

Individual Meritorious Conduct Award: Firefighter/EMT Nicholas M. Holmes

- On November 16, 2020, Lynnfield Fire Rescue 2 was the first Lynnfield Fire Department unit on-scene for a report of a pickup truck engulfed in flames on Route 1. The driver had crashed into a signpost after fleeing police. Firefighter/Paramedic Nicholas Holmes quickly assessed the situation and determined that the driver was unresponsive, pinned inside the burning vehicle, and had to be pulled out quickly. He used hand tools to break the windows, climbed into the passenger compartment, and placed an SCBA face piece on the driver. Additional responding firefighters used extinguishers to suppress the heavy fire, and a driver of a passing concrete truck used his water supply to help knock it down. The driver was extricated with hydraulic tools and transported by MedFlight to Massachusetts General Hospital with multiple severe burns and other injuries – but alive.

New Bedford Fire Department

Group Meritorious Conduct Award: Captain Kurt Houghton, Lieutenant Louis Miranda, Firefighter Eric Britto, Firefighter Andrew R. Coderre, Firefighter Darien Jacintho, Firefighter Kenneth Letourneau, Firefighter Paul Medeiros, and Firefighter Manuel Mota, Jr.

Medal of Valor: Firefighter Paul Medeiros

- New Bedford Fire Engine Co. 6 and Ladder Co. 3 responded to a house fire on March 21, 2021, with reports of people trapped on the second and third floors. Firefighters encountered heavy smoke but were able to hoist a ground ladder to the second-floor deck and cut away a section of the railing to rescue one person. They then raised a second ladder from the deck to the third-floor window to rescue another man in desperate need of help. As Firefighter Medeiros climbed up, the man jumped out of the window in an attempt to reach the ladder. Firefighter Medeiros was able to grab onto him, preventing him from falling, and with another firefighter got him back on the ladder. The residents were taken to local hospitals for smoke inhalation and released shortly thereafter. The fire was extinguished by crews from four engines and two ladder companies, with no firefighter injuries. Firefighters also rescued a large number of cats from the home, including 24 who survived.

New Bedford Fire Department

Norman Knight Excellence in Community Service Award: Firefighter Bryce Fortes

- In 10 years as a New Bedford Firefighter, Bryce Fortes has volunteered thousands of hours to help vulnerable members of his community. As a dedicated leader in local charitable efforts, he donates meals to a local shelter for families in crisis and mentors children there. At the New Bedford Boys and Girls Club, he purchased 10 Kindle Fire tablets as educational tools for local youth. Recognizing education as a key route to success, FF Fortes organizes a school supply drive with the fire department each year, placing drop-off boxes at firehouses across the city, retrieving the donated materials, and distributing them to kids who need them most.

Saugus Fire Department

Group Meritorious Conduct Award: Captain Chris Vinard, Firefighter Sean Bohannon, and Firefighter Greg Cinelli

Medal of Valor: Firefighter Greg Cinelli

- On August 6, 2020, the Saugus Fire Department was called to assist Saugus Police, who were attempting to interview a suspect at his residence. The suspect had retreated into his

home and made threats to harm himself. Firefighters responded to safely open the door and stand by in the event medical aid was needed. When the officers entered, the suspect was wielding a knife. Three officers suffered stabbing and slashing wounds and the fourth was injured during the struggle with the suspect. Despite the danger to themselves, Firefighters Bohannon and Cinelli entered the house. Firefighter Cinelli, who has served several combat tours as a U.S. Marine and has a brown belt in Jiu Jitsu, stepped in to help stop the attack. He grabbed the knife, disarmed the assailant, and placed him in a shoulder hold while police officers secured the struggling suspect's hands and legs. Captain Vinard and Firefighter Bohannon maintained control of the scene until additional police arrived and transferred the suspect to custody. The wounded officers recovered from their injuries and the suspect is awaiting trial.

Somerville Fire Department

Group Meritorious Conduct Award: Deputy Chief Michael J. Anzalone, Lieutenant Thomas Bellini, Lieutenant Danielle O'Hearn, Firefighter Christopher Carroll, Firefighter Charles Conway, Firefighter Ryan M. Epps, Firefighter Douglas Henry, Firefighter Alex Massiah, Firefighter John C. O'Connor, and Firefighter Mark Wall

Medal of Valor: Lieutenant Danielle O'Hearn

- It was a windy, frigid early morning on December 30th last year when Somerville firefighters responded to a three-alarm residential fire with an elderly couple trapped on the second floor. Upon arrival, smoke was visible from the basement and there were additional reports of a family of five also inside. An initial search was performed, and a second alarm struck. The couple on the second floor was overcome with smoke and were hanging over the porch railing. Lieutenant Bellini and Firefighter Henry tried to make their way to the second floor through the rear entrance while a ground ladder was also set up. The woman from the second floor was rescued over the ground ladder. As Lieutenant O'Hearn attempted to help the man onto the ladder, fire conditions drastically changed. The elderly man, who had mobility issues, was unable to get onto the ladder. With the flames intensifying and their lives in danger, Lieutenant O'Hearn made the decision to "leave the porch" the fastest way she could. Using her body and protective gear as a shield to protect the man, she wrapped her body around him and pushed herself off the porch. They landed first on the shed and ultimately fell to the ground as firefighters helped to cushion their fall. Lieutenant O'Hearn suffered head, hand, and leg injuries in the fall and was transported to Massachusetts General Hospital – but the man she saved was unharmed. Firefighters continued to search the inside of the home but had to make a quick exit as fire conditions worsened. Despite the extreme danger at the scene, all residents and firefighters made complete recoveries.

Springfield Fire Department

Group Meritorious Conduct Award: Firefighter Jonathan Shea and Firefighter George Vasquez

Medal of Valor: Firefighter George Vasquez

- When Springfield firefighters responded to an early morning house fire last Christmas Eve, they found heavy smoke visible from the roof. Crews immediately began suppression efforts and members entered the dwelling backed up by a hose line. During the search inside, Firefighter George Vasquez, serving as acting Lieutenant on scene, realized that two crew members had fallen through the ceiling into the basement. He

found the basement stairs and went down without the protection of a hose line. He immediately found Firefighter Jonathan Shea, who was searching for his colleague. Firefighter Vasquez started his own search and found the third firefighter, low on air and injured. Engine 8 members were able to knock down the fire in the stairway and help to remove him to medical aid. While the house was completely destroyed by the fire, the occupants made it out safely and all firefighters made complete recoveries.

Sutton Fire Department

Individual Meritorious Conduct Award: Chief Matthew Belsito

- Firefighter of the Year award recipients are usually nominated by the chiefs of their departments; this one was nominated by the chief in the town where he was vacationing. On July 8, 2020, Sutton Fire Chief Matthew Belsito was listening to his two-way radio while vacationing in Sandwich. He overheard an urgent call to the Sandwich Fire Department reporting two people in Scorton Creek being swept out to sea by a fast-moving current. A full marine response was launched but could not arrive for at least 10 minutes. Fortunately, Chief Belsito was not only nearby but also familiar with the area's currents and waterways – and he knew time was of the essence. He jumped into a boat with his brother and nephew, and within two minutes located the father and son, who were not wearing life jackets and barely holding onto a tube. Chief Belsito brought them onboard, radioed the Sandwich Fire Department that he had retrieved them, and stayed with them until paramedics arrived.

Worcester Fire Department

Medal of Valor: Firefighter Jon Paul Paige

- Firefighter Jon Paul Paige was off-duty and stopped at an intersection on Route 20 in Worcester in the afternoon of June 2, 2021, when he saw a group of dirt bike riders. One of these riders threw a rock through an SUV's rear window. An altercation ensued, and Firefighter Paige exited his vehicle to break it up. He got within five feet when the assailant pulled a gun and shot the 74-year-old SUV driver. When the shooter tried to pick up his dirt bike, he dropped the firearm and Firefighter Paige attempted to grab it. The shooter got it first – and pointed it straight at Firefighter Paige's face. He then threatened the crowd of bystanders who had gathered while he picked up his dirt bike and sped off. Firefighter Paige immediately turned his attention to the victim, who was bleeding badly from a gunshot wound to his femoral artery. He used the man's belt as a makeshift tourniquet for the potentially deadly injury, maintaining pressure until – by pure chance – a passing ambulance stopped to help. Firefighter Paige requested a tourniquet, stretcher, and oxygen. He assisted in emergency treatment until Worcester EMS arrived at the scene. Thankfully, the victim survived his injury.