

# Winter Weather Report 2023

PROTECTING OUR COMMUNITY DURING WINTER STORM MARA





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**3 – A Message from Fire Chief Joel G. Baker**

**4 – Operations**

**5 – Dispatch**

**6 – Operations and Logistics**

**7 – Adjustments: Cadet Academy, Recruiting, Community Outreach**

**8 – Fire Marshal's Office and Prevention**

**9 – Homeland Security and Special Operations**

**11 – Budget**

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OFFICE OF THE FIRE CHIEF

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**Joel G. Baker**

In 2021, there was “Snow-pocalypse”, a winter storm that blanketed Austin with more than six inches of snow, nearly an inch of ice from freezing rain, and nine consecutive days of below-freezing temperatures.

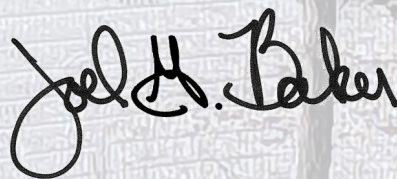
This year, our community dealt with “Tree-magedon”, when an ice storm—the worst the region had seen in more than 15 years—descended upon Austin. For three days, thousands of ice-laden trees across the city splintered and shattered from the weight of the frozen precipitation, causing massive power outages and immense piles of debris as branches, limbs, and even entire trees came down. The Texas A&M Forest Service estimates that 10.5 million trees in Austin were damaged during those 72 hours.

This report is a snapshot into the divisions within the Austin Fire Department most impacted by Winter Storm Mara, but they are by no means the exclusive bearers of what we dealt with during that time.

However, just as they did in 2021—and do every day, every shift, on every call—the men and women of the Austin Fire Department served you with compassion, efficiency, and dedication. I am humbled, but not surprised, by their selfless service and continued willingness to go above and beyond, no matter the situation or circumstances they may be facing.

To each and every one of them I say, THANK YOU. And to our community, we are grateful for the honor and privilege you have bestowed upon all of us at the Austin Fire Department to serve you. It is not a responsibility we take lightly or casually.

Sincerely,





# Operations



It's hard to imagine anything catching on fire when you're living through an ice storm; unfortunately, it can be quite the opposite. So many people were using their fireplaces to try and stay warm, our firefighters responded to more than seven chimney and fireplace-related fires, an unprecedented number to occur in just 72 hours.

**\*\*SAFETY TIP\*\*** *Before the next winter storm hits, have your fireplace and chimney cleaned and inspected to ensure everything is in good working order. And although it may be plentiful around here, NEVER burn cedar in a wood-burning fireplace; it gets too hot and can damage the interior of the fireplace, making it unsafe to use.*

Although we repeatedly issued warnings about the dangers of being out on the icy roads, we still responded to nine vehicle rescues. Sadly, we weren't immune to this issue either; several of our own apparatus were involved in traffic accidents, although thankfully, no one was hurt. When conditions are this bad, the danger level goes way up, not just for the community we serve, but for us as well.



**Austin Fire Dept** @austinfiredpt · Jan 31

Good news! Since 9 a.m., we've been to <20 accidents on area roadways. GREAT job, y'all! Bad news: more rain's expected overnight/early a.m. tomorrow, and temps stay below freezing.

Keep up the great work, ATX; stay home/off the roads. That helps 1st responders be safe, too!



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**\*\*SAFETY TIP\*\*** *Please stay home and off the roads! Your safety is our number one priority and reducing your risk helps reduce ours.*



# Dispatch

While it wasn't as busy as during the infamous "Snow-pocalypse" of 2021, Winter Storm Mara still kept our folks on their toes, earning the nickname "Tree-maggedon" from some!

But our Dispatch section was prepared; the normal staffing of nine personnel per shift was increased to 12. This ensured all Dispatch call-taking and radio communication positions were filled for the entire weather event, providing the support our Operations' crews needed to protect our community. During the three-day storm, Dispatchers managed almost 5,000 incidents and took more than 4,000 phone calls; in comparison, the three days before Winter Storm Mara hit, our dispatchers handled approximately 1,500 incidents. Those 72 hours resulted in an increase 3.5 times what they normally handle on an average day!

From January 30 — February 3, 2023, firefighters responded to more than 5,300 calls for assistance, with 40 percent of those related to arcing or downed wires. In addition, they also handled normal day-to-day business, including:

- Alarm activations: 394;
- Traffic incidents: 300; and
- Structure fire-related incidents: 46.





# Operations and Logistics

In anticipation of increased call volume during Winter Storm Mara, we prepared in advance, activating extra vehicles to meet anticipated demand. As staffing allowed, and using overtime, we utilized Brush Trucks each with two personnel to respond to a variety of calls (e.g., medical, alarm activations, wires arcing, and other storm-related calls).

We moved to RECON Level III per our Policy G301 (“Emergency Operations/Disaster Staffing Plan”). During this time, the Department’s Operations Center (DOC) was run from the Shift Commander’s Office, remaining in constant contact with the City’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

Due to a lower-than-normal call demand for certain types of incidents, the resources dispatched to the following calls were temporarily reduced:

- Some structure fires were coded as a Light Box Alarm instead of a full Box Alarm.
- Vehicle collisions received one apparatus instead of the two normally dispatched.
- Mid-rise and high-rise alarm activations received one apparatus instead of the two normally dispatched.
- During peak demand, non-emergent calls were held in queue until adequate resources were available to respond.





## Adjustments: Cadet Academy

Our Fire Cadet Academy has a stringent timeline that requires cadets to train for 28 weeks consecutively, which is required in order for them to become certified by the Texas Commission Fire Protection (TCFP). During Winter Storm Mara, cadets in Class 135, along with uniformed training staff, were deemed essential employees, so the following adjustments were made to the training schedule, ensuring cadets did not lose any of the required 28-week instruction time:

- Cadets were able to continue classroom instruction via teleworking; and
- They trained on the weekend after the storm passed to complete their hands-on training in vehicle extrication since this lesson had to be postponed due to unsafe outdoor conditions.



## Adjustments: Recruiting and Community Outreach

On February 1, 2023, two members of our Recruiting and Community Outreach sections were redirected to assist with emergency call response; all activities related to those sections were temporarily suspended. These members were instead made available to assist Operations by responding to lower-priority incidents in an AFD vehicle during a 10-hour shift.



## Fire Marshal's Office—Prevention

Our Prevention Division supplied the personnel to staff a daytime brush truck from Station 37, providing assistance with responses to multiple wires down incidents and other lower priority storm-related incidents. They offered same day, on-site inspections to the City's Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) division after receiving last-minute notice of the activation of additional cold-weather shelters. They also provided the guidance and requirements for fire watch for those facilities with any fire protection system deficiencies, ensuring guests who took advantage of those resources were safe and warm.

Prevention personnel monitored fire protection system impairments throughout Austin, temporarily re-assigning personnel to follow-up with property owners whose sites were experiencing impairments. Our members provided guidance regarding compliance and ensured proper fire watches were implemented when appropriate. As fire protection system impairments were brought into compliance, they updated our Dispatch personnel so those properties could be removed from the Computer Automated Data (CAD) System.



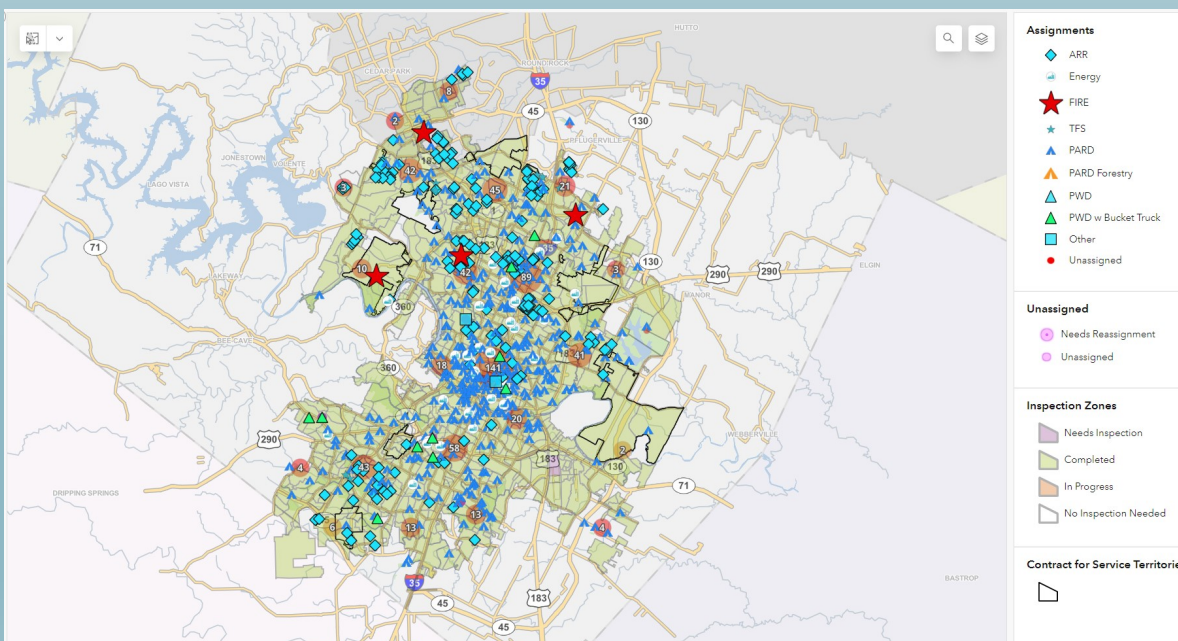


# Homeland Security and Special Operations

As part of the Situational Assessment Team, the EOC was staffed with three of our Battalion Chiefs who self-assigned themselves to various pending incidents (e.g., wires arcing or wires down, various medical calls, assisting the public in some capacity, broken water pipes, etc.).

As part of the recovery effort, they worked with our partners and stakeholders at the EOC, City of Austin Public Works, Austin Resource Recovery, Austin Energy, Austin Parks and Recreation, and the Texas A&M Forest Service, and led a joint effort to identify hazards associated with downed trees and limbs. We also populated a GIS application with photos, locations, and descriptions of material on roads, power lines, rights of way, sidewalks, and driveways. These hazards were qualified as needing immediate attention, medium or low priority, or other, and were handled accordingly.

Additionally, three 40-hour staff members were deployed as a team on a Brush Truck, and as a Technical Specialist/Chief's Aide on a Battalion Chief's truck. Two other members joined a Brush Truck Strike Team and responded to incidents during the peak of the storm. Their efforts preserved the availability of Operations' units for higher priority calls for service. They also drove the Battalion 6 Chief to incidents and assisted Command with such items as radios, the accountability board, Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) Scott Connect, situational awareness/360 size-up, and serving as an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) drone pilot.



A total of 1,346 data points were generated in two days. Items were assigned to the appropriate department for mitigation, with 145 of the “immediate attention”

items being addressed within 48 hours. The remaining medium and low priority items took just a week to reconcile.



As the ice began to melt, and as time allowed, our crews grabbed their chainsaws and assisted in clearing the thousands of broken limbs from streets and sidewalks across the city.





# Budget

Thankfully, Winter Storm Mara wasn't as long-lasting or detrimental as the "Snow-pocalypse" of 2021.

Yet approximately 1,700 hours of labor (at a cost of \$130,000) went into staffing during the course of those three days, ensuring those on the front lines had the resources, personnel, and rest they needed to get the job done.










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