In the early morning hours of July 23, a second-alarm fire broke out at an apartment building on Northeast Glisan Street. By the time its embers were extinguished, two people tragically lost their lives, along with pet snakes and a dog. Ten adults and 15 children were displaced by the fire, losing their homes and their belongings. By July 27, a man was arrested on charges of aggravated murder and arson and booked into Multnomah County Jail.

The day after the Glisan Street fire, calls came into 9-1-1 at about 2:30 pm reporting an explosion on North Kerby Street. Firefighters arrived to find a residence destroyed by the explosion and neighborhood homes damaged and on fire. It was determined that the illegal production of butane hash oil caused the explosion and ensuing fires, which also contributed to the death of two people.

Acting PIO Damon Simmons was on duty during both of these events and he says PF&R’s Arson Investigation Team’s great work helped firm up resolution during these tragic events. "While their focus is always on accuracy, not speed, they were able to bring in partners such as ATF, PPB, OSP and Gresham Fire and work well with them to bring clarity to neighbors and family members," he says. "Additionally, with a high level of media interest around both cases, the team shared important information while balancing the delicate needs of the investigation."

Even though team members have seen a lot on the job, when asked about the week of July 23, Investigator Rick McGraw (the longest tenured team member), let out a sigh. "It’s rare for us to get a double-fatality, but to get two back-to-back double fatalities is unbelievable," he says. His partner, Joe Luiz, chimed in, "And there was a double-homicide. Even one arson homicide is rare."

When one of the cornerstones of the Coggle strategic plan is zero fire deaths, a week with four fire deaths could be seen as a setback, but the investigators look at it differently.

Their work parsing out what happened can help save lives in the future. For example, at the scene of a fatality, they can often track elements of the environment that could have been manipulated to make the occupant safer, regardless of the fire cause: things such as working smoke alarms, closed bedroom doors, or building materials. They can also reverse engineer these same things when they investigate a fire where people survived to show how they stayed safe. These pieces of information help inform public education campaigns, code creation, and even legislation.

PF&R’s Arson Investigation Unit is considered one of the best in the country. The team’s structure of having an embedded police detective (Det. Joe Luiz) within a crew of fire investigators trained and sworn by police to do arson investigations is considered an ideal configuration. Still, PF&R is the only department in the state with this structure. "Most departments have investigators who hand off what they find to their police departments, which are not focused on arson," says Jason Andersen, an investigator who has been on the team since 2008. PF&R’s structure is just one of the reasons why the department has a high case clearance rate, meaning they solve a good percentage of their cases.

The week of July 23 tested the arson investigation team’s limits and they came through with the level of proficiency, efficiency, and professionalism that they are known for. But the team is quick to thank their partners and especially the firefighters on the line who step up to help them on not just these scenes, but many incidents. "Without their help, we could not do the job that we need to do," says Andersen.