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Report of the Week

"For Sale" may mean "Firefighter Beware."
10/22/2009

Report Number: 09-909

Report Date: 10/04/2009 20:57

Synopsis

Possible attempted arson threatens fire crew.

Demographics

Department type: Volunteer

Job or rank: Assistant Chief

Department shift:

Age:

Years of fire service experience:

Region: FEMA Region II

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: Fire emergency event: structure fire, vehicle fire, wildland fire, etc.

Event date and time: 10/03/2009 00:00

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Told to and submitted by safety officer

Weather at time of event: Clear and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- Situational Awareness

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Life threatening injury

Event Description

Units responded to a report of a natural gas odor. Upon arrival, the deputy chief located the caller who stated that the vacant house next door has a strong odor of gas coming from it. After a complete 360 degree walk-around, the deputy chief confirmed the dispatch.

The house had a "FOR SALE" sign in the front yard and was reported to be vacant. The gas line going into the structure was shut off by the fire department. The gas utility company was notified and responded. Once the gas company arrived, the fire department gained access to the structure but did not enter. After venting the structure for approximately twenty minutes, the fire department entered. Once in the house, they entered the utility room to find a gas line for a gas clothes dryer was left in the "on" position. The dryer had been removed. Right next to the gas dryer was a wash sink with water slowly running from the faucet. The water was hot water. In the same room and in close proximity to the gas line was a hot water heater. This created the perfect recipe to blow up a house. Upon further investigation the house just went into foreclosure. We consider this a close call because, if we had just entered this

house, we potentially could have lost an entire company. The decision to not enter this vacant building was important and communication was a key factor.

Lessons Learned

Always conduct a 360 degree walk-around.

Notice "FOR SALE" signs, identify vacant properties, and talk to neighbors.

Step back and proceed cautiously when responding to situations like this.

Good decision making and communications skills are always key factors.

Maintain situational awareness when planning what to do.

Remember to conduct a complete size-up and use caution when responding to reported gas odors. Good communication and command structure protected the responders from a potential disaster. When approaching a structure with a suspected gas leak inside, use a meter and check explosive levels before entering. To help mitigate this situation, we utilized a gas powered fan to ventilate. However, for safety purposes, we started the fan at a remote location and then walked it to the position just outside the front door. Remember, if a scene seems suspicious, do not tamper with evidence. In this case, we notified the police department and the Fire Investigation Unit for further investigation.

Discussion Questions

Report 09-909 recounts one episode that should have us more aware of vacant properties in our own communities with an eye on size-up, risk assessment, and pre-determined action planning. The thought process behind combining free-flowing gas with a spark from a drained hot water heater's source when activated could be called a "perfect storm." Once you have read the entire account of 09-909 and the related reports, consider the following:

1. What is your department's response to reports of strong odors of gas?
2. If you had been the first in officer of the incident described in 09-909, would you have taken a similar course of action, or chosen a different action plan. Explain your decision to your crew.
3. How is your department tracking vacant structures in your community? Is the information shared with other departments?
4. Has your department experienced an increase in incidents in abandoned structures since the economy took its downturn?
5. If yes to #4, what impact has the increased activity had on morale, equipment, and personnel?

Related Reports

05-637

06-231

07-1036

08-125

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.