

Investigative Checklist

Checklist

Record the names/unit numbers (and times, if possible) of the first 5 (or so) arriving firefighters.

Rationale:

This may require reading run reports, listening to radio traffic/dispatch logs, examining surveillance camera footage, reviewing electronic lock/keycard access reports, and/or speaking to other firefighters. It is worth going back to earlier fires to record this information as well. Consider patterns of firefighters that consistently attend all of the suspect fires. Also note how quickly after (or before) the fire was dispatched they arrived at the station or on scene.

Listen to the 911 call(s) reporting the fire. If possible, call the witness(es) back and ask to set-up an interview about what was seen.

In many firefighter arson cases the firefighter may call in the fire anonymously or have a close friend/accomplice call in the fire for them. The voice may be recognized or fire service jargon may be used. Radio traffic may be noticeable in the background. The dispatchers may be able to provide information about the caller and determine if that caller has previously had contact with 911—a pattern may surface where the firefighter has found a number of fires.

Involve law enforcement/fire marshal as early as possible in the investigation even if only in an advisory capacity.

Many of the concerns about involving outside agencies can be mitigated by working with law enforcement agencies that have established relationships with the department.

They can help with conducting the investigation, recovering evidence, interviewing witnesses and subject(s), liaising with the prosecutor's office, etc. In the interest of transparency and neutrality it may be requested that law enforcement officers conduct their investigation independently.

Checklist

Plot all potentially incendiary fires on a map or GIS mapping program.

Rationale:

Geographic patterns (or time/day patterns) are likely to become evident when plotted on a map. While this can be accomplished with colored pushpins and a paper map, a local or regional law enforcement agency, planning office, or transportation office, may have access to GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and can quickly create a digital map with all of the fires.

Note any suspicious behavior among firefighters or bystanders.

Observations at the scene can be pivotal in arson cases. Note any people acting suspiciously or out of character. Note the license plates of any vehicles present at multiple fires. Note footprints, tire tracks, or other evidence that may be related to the case. Make sure to also ask crew members to relay their observations.

Protect the fire scene and any potential evidence from destruction or tampering.

As with any potential arson fire, it is imperative to take steps to identify and preserve evidence. A fire investigation should begin from the time of the first call not after the scene has cooled down. Firefighters may inadvertently step on, bury, or otherwise destroy potential evidence. Take steps to barricade, tape off, mark, or otherwise note where evidence is located.

Photograph or video record the scene to document potential evidence.

It is important to record the fire scene and extinguishment activities whenever possible to help the investigator piece together what happened, when it happened, and how it happened. Record any potential evidence as soon as it is identified. Conduct a 360-degree walk around of the fire and potentially conduct an interior survey. Also, if possible, record the faces in the crowd and their vehicles.

Many times bystanders or the media may be taking video or photographs. Speak to them, gather their contact information, and request a copy of their footage.

Checklist

Keep overhaul activities to an absolute minimum to prevent rekindle.

Rationale:

If possible, it is recommended to have a different crew do overhaul than the crew that extinguished the blaze. This reduces an opportunity for any involved party to destroy evidence. Overhaul can destroy both the evidence and fire patterns that investigators use to identify origin and cause.

Contact the fire marshal from the scene and try to maintain control of the scene until they arrive.

If there is reason to suspect that a fire may be incendiary or undetermined, contact the fire marshal or fire investigator as soon as possible. If they are planning to visit the fire scene within a reasonable period of time, try to maintain control of the fire scene until they arrive. Leaving the fire scene may require investigators to obtain a search warrant, taking valuable time and providing an opportunity for people to tamper with the scene or destroy evidence.