



PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND  
FIRE/EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT GENERAL ORDER

<b>General Order Number:</b> 12-10	<b>Effective Date:</b> March 2009
<b>Division:</b> Inspections and Investigations	
<b>Chapter:</b> Use of Fire/Explosives Investigations Investigator	
<b>By Order of the Fire Chief:</b> Marc S. Bashoor	<b>Revision Date:</b> N/A

## POLICY

This General Order shall establish procedures to effectively utilize Fire/Explosion Fire Investigators and to establish procedures to manage fire and/or explosive incidents to avoid unnecessary damage or disruption at a fire scene.

## DEFINITIONS

**Accidental Fire Cause** - Accidental fires involve all those for which the proven cause does not involve an intentional human act to ignite or spread fire into an area where the fire should not be. When the intent of the person's action cannot be determined or proven to an acceptable level of certainty, the correct classification is undetermined. (NFPA 921)

**Fire/Explosives Fire Investigator** – A career employee assigned full-time to the Fire and Explosive Investigations Section of the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department who is trained in arson and explosion investigations. Individuals within this office who is granted arrest powers by the Fire Chief must successfully complete a training program from a police training school approved by the Maryland Police Training Commission established under Title 3, Subtitle 2 of the Public Safety Article.

**NOTE:** Fire Investigators with arrest powers may be referenced as "Deputy Fire Marshal."

**Incendiary Fire Cause** – The incendiary fire is one intentionally ignited under circumstances in which the person knows that the fire should not be ignited. (NFPA 921)

**Incident Commander** – The Fire/EMS Department Incident Commander as defined in the Chain of Command when a formal command has been established. If no formal command has been established, then the Incident Commander shall be the officer-in-charge, which is generally the highest ranking individual from the Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department.

**Natural Fire Cause** – Natural fire causes involve fires caused without direct human intervention or action, such as fires resulting from lightening, earthquake, and wind. (NFPA 921)

**Physical Evidence** – Physical Evidence, defined generally, is any physical or tangible item that tends to prove or disprove a particular fact or issue. Physical Evidence at the fire scene may be relevant to the issues of the origin, cause, spread, or the responsibility for the fire. (NFPA 921)

**Trailer** – Is "any accelerant, combustible, or flammable material used to spread fire from one point or area to another. Examples include newspaper, rope or string, clothing or drapes, wax paper, and flammable accelerants such as gasoline or alcohol.



**Under Investigation Fire Cause** – Includes Undetermined Fire Causes which include those fires that have not yet been completely investigated or those that have been investigated, or are under investigation, and have insufficient information to classify further. (NFPA 921)

## **PROCEDURES / RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **1. General Information**

#### **Objectives**

- To assist suppression companies with conducting the initial stages of a fire investigation
- To provide assistance with identifying which information to obtain pertinent to an investigation
- To assist fire ground officers in deciding when it is appropriate to request Fire Investigations personnel.
- Significantly reduce out-of service time for units on the scene
- Ensures that early stages of the fire investigation are conducted properly
- Builds confidence in decision making with regards to determining the origin and cause of fires

#### **Overview / Recognition**

There are many incendiary fires that are not investigated because no one detects the questionable nature of the fire or there is no request for a Fire Investigator. It is the responsibility of the Incident Commander to request an investigation in the event he/she observes circumstances, which indicate the fire may be incendiary in nature, or the cause is unknown. This request should be made as soon as possible so that the scene remains secured and evidence can be preserved and collected.

The Incident Commander shall ensure that Fire/EMS Personnel maintains custody of the scene at all times, until the arrival of the Fire Investigator. This would require personnel to secure the scene in a manner that prohibits access to the fire scene and/or post detonation site after the emergency has been mitigated. In most cases securing the scene with fire line tape will suffice. The recognition of signs of forced entry such as broken doorframes or torn window screens is also very valuable to the investigation and such observations should be passed on to the Fire Investigator. Recognition examples are:

- Separate and unconnected fires
- Lack of accidental causes
- Unidentifiable point of origin
- Unusual burn patterns
- Missing inventory
- Evidence of forced entry
- Missing personal items
- Presence of ignitable liquids



## 2. Requesting a Fire Investigator

For the most effective investigation, a fire/explosives investigator should be notified and respond to all serious fires/explosions or possible arson fires immediately after fire apparatus is dispatched. Fire Investigators carry a complete, “ready to go” compliment of turnout gear, excavation tools, evidence collection equipment and camera equipment in his/her response vehicle.

The first Fire Investigator arriving on the scene shall ascertain if additional assistance is needed (i.e., Accelerant Detection Canine, Bomb Squad, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Fire Prevention, Hazardous Materials Team, County Police or additional Fire Investigators) utilizing the established Incident Command/Management System. Additional resources will be requested through “Command” and operate within the ICS. Appropriate Branch/Division/Group should be established in accordance to the ICS general order and NIMS. Calls for assistance should be made immediately upon determining the need and may be done at the discretion of the ranking Fire Investigator.

The Fire Investigator shall interview the Incident Commander and first arriving firefighters regarding their initial size-up and knowledge of the circumstances. This interview may be in the form of a written statement. Incident Commanders should make every effort to allow first arriving suppression units to remain on the scene until the interview/statements are completed.

The ranking Fire Investigator shall be in charge of the investigation once the emergency operations are complete and shall assume operational control of any portion of the building necessary for the investigation. This shall be coordinated with the Incident Commander.

If fire ground operations are in progress when the Fire Investigator arrives, and he/she is unable to get into the fire building for a preliminary scene examination, the Fire Investigator shall immediately begin documenting the scene and interviewing witnesses.

Incident Commanders are required to request response from the on-duty Fire Investigator(s) for the following:

- All multiple alarm fires/explosions.
- All fatal fires/explosions or suspected fatal fires/explosions.
- All critical injuries from fire or explosions.
- All injuries involving fireworks.
- All suspected explosions (i.e., gas, propane, destructive devices, drug labs, etc.).
- All bomb incidents (i.e., molotov cocktails or any destructive device).
- All cross burnings.
- All undetermined or arson fires in structures/dwellings.
- All known causes to fires in structures/dwelling with an estimated loss over \$50,000.
- Set fires to vacant and abandoned structures.
- All set fires to vehicles not stolen, with evidence or witnesses on the scene.



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- Any set fire with suspect information. (If a suspect is on the scene suppression personnel should request through PSC Police assistance and shall not in any way endanger themselves or take matters into their own hands.)
- All fires involving County property. (Notification may be made if necessary for Federal and/or State Properties to ensure the appropriate agency is dispatched to investigate.)
- All church fires or fires on church property.
- Multiple fires (dumpsters, brush, vehicle fires, etc. occurring in the same area and time).
- Vehicle accidents involving fire deaths.

Incident Commanders are required to notify the on-duty Fire Investigator for the following:

- Children under seven (7) years of age, who are playing with fire, obtain the child's full name, age, address, phone number(s), parent's full name, address and phone number(s).
- Several false alarms regardless of whether or not a suspect can be identified.
- All non-critical fire injuries of accidental fires, obtain name, address, date of birth, phone number(s), race, nature and extent of injuries, unit transporting and hospital destination.

If you have any question, contact the on-duty Fire Investigator at 301-306-5686 or after hours via the Emergency Operations Center at 301-583-2200.

Arson/Explosion Hotline 301-77-ARSON (301-772-7766)

### **3. Classification of Cause**

#### **Fire Incidents**

The cause of a fire may be classified as accidental, incendiary, natural or under investigation. The first due company shall report the fire as "Under Investigation" if Fire Investigators are called to the scene unless other arrangements are made between the Incident Commander and the on-scene ranking Fire Investigator.

At no time shall individuals other than Fire Investigations Personnel provide written reports directly to citizens regarding the classification of a fire cause.

#### **Explosive Incidents**

Generally the cause of explosions will carry the same classifications as fire scenes. Examples would be a natural gas explosion in a house (accidental), a pipe bomb (incendiary), a dust explosion (accidental), or a lightning strike (natural).

Additionally explosions have many sub-classes of classification regarding the type of explosion. Some of these examples are:

- Low Order/High Order
- Chemical/Mechanical Explosion



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- Low Explosive/High Explosive
- Seated/Nonseated Explosions

The classification of an explosion scene requires specific training that is not generally provided to Fire/EMS Personnel outside of the Bomb Squad and Fire investigations Personnel. Bomb Technicians and/or Fire Investigators shall respond to all explosive scenes and will determine the cause. Causes shall be listed as “under investigation” by suppression crews when Fire Investigators and/or Bomb Squad Personnel respond to the scene.

### **4. Scene Security/Chain of Custody**

Fire and explosion scenes always generate the interest of bystanders. Their safety, as well as the security of the scene and its evidence, must be addressed by the Incident Commander. This may be accomplished by fire line tape or may require the assistance of a Police Officer, Fire Fighter, etc. Any unauthorized individuals found inside the secured area should be identified and required to leave.

If a Fire Investigator is requested, the Incident Commander shall ensure that Fire/EMS personnel maintain custody of the scene until his/her arrival. It is important to realize that every fire scene should be treated as a crime scene in which a criminal investigation will be conducted. Fire patterns are used to determine the area and point of origin. Overhaul should be kept to an absolute minimum until the Fire/Explosion Fire Investigator arrives and examines the scene. It is often common practice to start overhaul within the room of origin which destroys critical burn patterns embedded in the drywall. The same void spaces can be inspected for fire spread by removing drywall, plaster, and other wall coverings from the unburned side that was not impinged by fire in an adjacent room.

The positions of objects in the room such as furniture assist the Fire Investigator in determining the fire cause. If an item must be removed, note the exact position and orientation of the object. (A smoldering mattress; if it needs to be removed, make note of the top, head, and foot so that the scene may be reconstructed).

In the event of any suspicious or unknown cause of a fire, Firefighters need to use extra caution in suppression activities and overhaul of the fire scene. Unnecessary structural damage such as removal or destruction of windows, walls, and doors shall be avoided.

### **5. Physical Evidence**

- Fingerprints
- Tool Marks
- DNA
- Ignitable Liquids/Power Tools

### **Crime Scene Contamination**



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The use of gasoline and diesel powered tools and generators should be avoided whenever possible. If gasoline/diesel powered equipment must be used, refueling of any equipment shall be done outside of the structure.

### **6. Fire Deaths**

All fire deaths (including accidental fires) shall be considered a crime scene. When death occurs by fire or explosion, the investigation will be conducted with the Prince George's County Police Department's Homicide Unit. The determination of arson or explosion will be made by the Department's Fire Investigator who has the technical expertise necessary to make this determination.

### **7. Safety on Explosion Scenes**

Structures that have sustained explosions are often more structurally damaged than a burned building. The possibility of a building collapse is much greater and should always be considered. In case of fuel, gas, or dust explosions, secondary explosions are the rule rather than the exception. Explosion scenes that involve bombing or explosives have added danger. Personnel should be aware of secondary devices and undetonated explosives.

When an incendiary or explosive device is discovered that has not activated, do not move it! Bomb Squad personnel are the only personnel authorized to handle such devices. Touching or moving such device may result in an ignition or explosion. All devices should be considered to be active and dangerous until otherwise determined by a member of the Department's Bomb Squad. Every precaution should be taken to protect lives and property when dealing with an incendiary or explosive device.

### **Personal Protective Equipment**

Fire investigators shall wear the appropriate level of personal protective equipment as the incident dictates.

### **REFERENCES**

Annotated Code of Maryland, Public Safety Article, Title 3: Law Enforcement, Subtitle 2: Police Training Commission

Annotated Code of Maryland, Criminal Procedures Article, Title 2: Law Enforcement Procedures; Arrest Process, Subtitle 2: Warrantless Arrests, Section 2-208.3

National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 921

### **FORMS / ATTACHMENTS**

N/A