



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: The Application of NFPA 921 in Fire and Explosion Investigations

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Learning Objective: The student shall be able to explain the importance of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 921 in fire and explosion investigations and its applicability to fire and explosion investigations.

NFPA 921, *Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations* plays a fundamental role in fire and explosion investigations. A new edition of NFPA 921 is scheduled to be published in 2014. For years, this document has played a critical role in the training, education and job performance of fire and explosion investigators. It also serves as one of the primary references used by the National Fire Academy to support its fire/arson-related training and education programs. It is imperative that investigators understand the scope, purpose and application of this document, especially since it will be used to judge the quality and thoroughness of their investigations.

The purpose of NFPA 921 is to establish guidelines and recommendations for the safe and systematic investigation or analysis of fire and explosion incidents. It is designed to assist individuals who are charged with the responsibility of investigating and analyzing fire and explosion incidents and rendering opinions as to the origin, cause, responsibility or prevention of such incidents, and the damage and injuries that arise from such incidents.

NFPA 921 is a guide developed through the NFPA consensus process and guided by a technical committee comprised of representatives from various organizations in the field of fire and explosion investigation. The document is revised every three years.

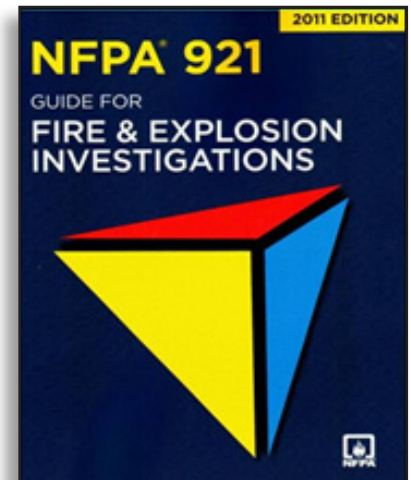
NFPA defines a “guide” as a document that is advisory or informative in nature and that contains only nonmandatory provisions. A guide may contain mandatory statements such as when a guide can be used, but as a whole it is not suitable for adoption into law. However, it should be noted that future editions of NFPA 921 may change from a guide to a recommended practice. NFPA defines a “recommended practice” as a document similar in content and structure to a code or standard but that contains only nonmandatory provisions using the word “should” to indicate recommendations in the body of the text. In the current edition of NFPA 921, there are no statements specifically indicating what fire investigators “should” do.

Key chapters of the document include:

- Chapter 4 — Basic Methodology.
- Chapter 5 — Basic Fire Science.
- Chapter 6 — Fire Patterns.
- Chapter 17 — Origin Determination.
- Chapter 18 — Fire Cause Determination.

It is important to note that courts around the country use NFPA 921 in their evaluation of expert testimony. Most of those courts use the term “standard” and “guide” interchangeably, referring to NFPA 921 as a “standard of care” or use some other similar term or phrase when discussing the document in their opinions. In addition, defense attorneys are using NFPA 921 to challenge expert opinions offered by fire and explosion investigators based not only on their qualifications but also, more importantly, adherence to the scientific method, knowledge and understanding of fire science, appropriate use of the process of elimination, and the proper interpretation of burn pattern evidence.

Additional information and copies of NFPA 921 may be obtained at www.nfpa.org.



NFPA 921 is a key document that all fire and explosion investigators must be familiar with to successfully execute their duties and responsibilities.