



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: The First Responder's Role in Fire/Arson Investigation

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Learning Objective: The student will be able to explain the role of first responders in a fire or arson investigation.

First responders are responsible for protecting lives and property from fire and other potential harm. In fulfilling this responsibility, these personnel are often in the best position to document information that may assist investigators who may be called to the scene of a fire or explosion. These individuals have the unique opportunity to view the scene shortly after the event and can take actions that can be of critical importance to the investigation.

Listed below are guidelines to assist first responders in obtaining information that is important to investigators for conducting successful preliminary and follow-up investigations.

Establishing a working relationship with local fire investigators.

Preparation before an incident is critical to ensuring that the response and investigation run smoothly and systematically. First responders should reach out to fire investigators and law enforcement personnel in their jurisdiction and meet with them to develop a plan. This can help to ensure that a positive working relationship and sharing of information consistently occurs at all scenes, which can prove instrumental in identifying potential criminal activities.

Training of first responders in evidence recognition, documentation and preservation. Every fire and explosion scene should be treated as a crime scene until the fire investigator has determined otherwise. There are four key steps that first responders can take to assist in the investigative process: **observation, recognition, preservation** and **notification**.

Observation means noting conditions and circumstances at the scene. Documented information by first responders with regard to fire behavior, conditions in the area/room of origin, victims found, witness behaviors, rescuer actions and contact information for witnesses can be a tremendous help to investigators. **Recognition** means realizing what items and areas may be of evidentiary value. **Preservation** means practicing suppression and overhaul techniques that minimize damage to the scene. These include:

- Using fog patterns instead of straight streams to avoid scattering potential evidence.
- Avoiding excessive overhaul that may damage evidence or obscure fire patterns.
- Refraining from moving switches or plugs located on utilities and appliances.
- Limiting the use of gasoline- and diesel-powered tools and equipment to minimize evidence contamination issues.

An adequate, secure perimeter should be established around the scene. Personnel should be posted to prevent unauthorized access by people who may alter or destroy potential evidence. These areas include burned/damaged areas, trash receptacles where accelerant containers may have been deposited, debris fields, and points of ingress and egress where shoe prints, tire impressions, fingerprints and trace evidence may remain.

Notification means informing the Incident Commander and investigators of anything observed in the course of carrying out on-scene operations. First responders should notify fire investigators in any situation where there is a question concerning the origin and cause of the incident or “things just don’t add up.” Ensure that any personnel with firsthand observations and knowledge speak with fire investigators to relay what they observed, heard or documented before leaving the scene. This firsthand knowledge can play a key role in scene reconstruction, determination of causation and assignment of responsibility.

Additional information on the first responder’s role in fire investigation can be obtained from the “How First Responders Impact the Fire Investigation” online training module at www.cfitrainer.net. A DVD training program is also available from the International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI). Copies of the DVD can be obtained by contacting IAAI headquarters via www.firearson.com.

http://www.usfa.fema.gov/fireservice/prevention_education/strategies/arson/aaw13/resources.shtm



Photo/Prince George's County, Maryland Fire Department

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www.usfa.fema.gov/nfa/coffee-break/