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LESSON LEARNED

Fire Operations: Establishing Standard Operating Procedures for Residential and Commercial Building Fires

SUMMARY

Fire departments should adopt standard operating procedures (SOP) that designate apparatus positioning and tactical responsibilities for residential and commercial building fires. Such procedures provide a structured yet flexible framework for standard tactical operations and deployment of personnel and fire apparatus. Tactical responsibilities such as water supply and interior assignments should be incorporated into the building's pre-plan and should be disseminated to all fire companies that normally would respond to a fire in the subject building.

DESCRIPTION

On October 31, 2006, at approximately 10:00 p.m., an arsonist set fire to a stack of old mattresses in the Mizpah Hotel in downtown Reno, Nevada. A smoke detector in the second floor hallway of the hotel's north wing activated the building's alarm system after the arsonist set the fire. Security personnel monitoring the alarm system promptly alerted the Reno Fire Department (RFD). Fire personnel at an RFD station only 500 feet from the hotel observed heavy black smoke coming from the north side of the structure. An officer at the station updated dispatch on the worsening conditions and requested that the incident be upgraded to a working fire assignment for additional assistance.

RFD Station 1 units arrived on the scene 2 minutes after dispatch and observed moderate to heavy black smoke coming from the windows on the second and third floors of the hotel's north wing. Hotel residents and guests began to yell from their windows and threatened to jump as responders arrived on the scene. Firefighters delayed offensive fire operations until the first-arriving units rescued those individuals who could be seen at their windows. Offensive fire operations lasted for fewer than 10 minutes before shifting to defensive operations to protect the remaining unaffected sections of the hotel.

For additional information on the incident response, please see the [US Fire Administration Twelve-Fatality Hotel Arson](#).

Early in the incident's response, RFD established unified command consisting of the Reno Police Department; Washoe County Sheriff's Office; Regional Emergency Medical Services Authority; Washoe County District Attorney's Office; Reno Building Department; American Red Cross; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives Regional National Response Team; and regional Urban Search and Rescue teams. The fire required 4 alarms, 16 fire apparatuses, and 72 fire and rescue personnel. In total, 12 people died and 31 sought medical attention, and RFD rescued 70 residents from the Mizpah Hotel.

The first-arriving engine company failed to establish an adequate and reliable water supply despite the evidence of heavy smoke prior to leaving the fire station. As a result, firefighters relied solely on tank water until a later-arriving engine company laid a supply

line from a nearby hydrant to the first-arriving engine. While the first firefighters on the scene initiated rescue operations as soon as they arrived, a United States Fire Administration (USFA) report concluded that connecting to a fire hydrant to establish a reliable water source for an initial attack would have taken little time.

The USFA report found that establishing SOPs that designate apparatus positioning and tactical responsibilities for residential and commercial building fires would provide a structured and flexible framework for standard tactical operations and for the deployment of personnel and fire apparatus. Implementing these types of SOPs would better define roles and would decrease confusion among response personnel from multiple departments and jurisdictions during large-scale incidents.

Fire departments should adopt SOPs that designate apparatus positioning and tactical responsibilities for residential and commercial building fires. Such procedures provide a structured yet flexible framework for standard tactical operations and deployment of personnel and fire apparatus. Tactical responsibilities such as water supply and interior assignments should be incorporated into the building's pre-plan and should be disseminated to all fire companies that normally would respond to a fire in the subject building.

CITATION

Department of Homeland Security, United States Fire Administration. *Technical Report Series: Twelve-Fatality Hotel Arson*. May 2008.

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