

South Texas Arson Response Team

Standard Operating Procedures

March 2009

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Section A. General

1. Background

The South Texas Arson Response Team (START) was initiated as a response to the need for a resource to investigate significant fire incidents in South Texas. START is a cooperative effort of the South Texas Fire Investigators Association and is supported by the member agencies.

2. Objectives

The primary objectives of START are:

1. To concentrate investigative resources and expertise on those incidents and investigations that are clearly beyond the resources, capabilities, and expertise of any member agency.
2. To provide a timely and sustained response capability to such situations when requested.
3. To provide training to START members and others interested in improving their fire investigation skills.

3. Training

A training program will be recommended by the START Executive Committee. The purpose of this training will be to improve the quality of service provided to requesting agencies. Training recommendations can be made by member agencies.

4. Structure/Resources

The START Executive Committee shall be responsible for the overall supervision and execution of the South Texas Arson Response Team. The direct management of START will be conducted by the START Coordinator. The START Coordinator shall be appointed by the START Executive Committee on a yearly basis. The START Team Leaders shall be appointed by the START Executive Committee on a yearly basis.

Section B. Qualifications for Membership

1. START Agency Membership

START membership requires that each participating agency properly execute the “Inter-local Assistance Agreement for Fire and Explosion Investigations” document.

2. Selection of START Members

START membership requires the following:

1. Active or Associate membership in the South Texas Fire Investigators Association.
2. A properly executed Inter-Local Agreement by the member’s sponsoring agency.
3. A completed application for START Membership.
4. Submission of an updated Curriculum Vitae.

NOTE: Selection of START members shall be made by the START Executive Committee. Membership shall be based on qualifications as outlined in this section. Any disqualifier outlined in subsection 4 will result in a membership denial.

3. Selection of START Coordinator and Team Leaders

1. The selection of the Coordinator and Team Leaders shall be made by the START Executive Committee. The President of the South Texas Fire Investigators Association shall Chair the START Executive Committee.
2. The minimum requirements for the Coordinator and Team Leaders shall be established by the START Executive Committee.

4. Disqualifiers

The following issues will ordinarily disqualify an applicant from acceptance into the START program:

1. Any finding of misconduct that reflects upon the truthfulness or possible bias of the applicant/member, including a finding of lack

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of candor during an administrative proceeding (such as internal affairs investigation).

2. Any pending criminal charge against the applicant/member.
3. Any credible allegation of misconduct that reflects upon the truthfulness or possible prejudice or bias of the applicant/member.
4. Findings of use of excessive force.
5. Credible evidence of current substance abuse.
6. It will be the responsibility of the member's agency to advise the START Executive Committee of any disqualifier(s).

5. Removal from START

The decision to remove a member from START will lie with the START Executive Committee and will be made after consultation with the member's sponsoring agency. The removal will be recommended by the START Coordinator. A member will not be removed from START without the approval of the START Executive Committee. Members of START will be removed from the team for any of the following reasons:

1. Engaging in disqualifying conduct as set forth in Section 4.
2. Refusing on three occasions to respond to START callouts within a one-year period, unless excused by the START Coordinator. Any such refusal to respond shall be documented by the START Coordinator.
3. Failing to attend any mandatory training without being excused.
4. The member agency withdraws approval (in writing) for participation of the member.

Section C. Duties and Responsibilities

1. START Duties and Responsibilities

The duties and responsibilities of the START are to:

- a. Provide a 24-hour response capability to any member agency.
- b. Provide member agencies with highly qualified arson investigators.
- c. Remain on the site and continue the investigation until a successful conclusion is reached, until the workload has been reduced to such a point that the requesting agency can complete the investigation, or until it has been determined that the team's services are no longer required.
- d. Additionally, to participate in the investigative process beyond the crime scene search and origin and cause determination. This process includes, but is not limited to, interviews, surveillance, execution of arrest/search warrants, etc.

2. START Executive Committee

The duties and responsibilities of the START Executive Committee are to:

- a. Prepare, enact, review and revise the Standard Operating Procedures of START on an annual basis.
- b. Ensure that the START is utilized and operated in the most efficient manner and for the benefit of all participating agencies.
- c. Review and select all members of START, including the yearly selection of the START Coordinators and Team Leaders.
- d. Prepare and a monthly/yearly activity report for the STFIA members.

3. START Coordinator/Asst. Coordinator

The duties and responsibilities of the START Coordinator/Asst. Coordinator are to:

- a. Answer all requests for a START callout from the participating requesting agencies.
- b. Immediately determine if the request meets the requirements as established in Section D.2.

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- c. **Contact the assigned START Team Leader for the callout and provide all pertinent information about the request.**
- d. **Ensure that the requesting agency has complied with the requirements for scene security as outline in the START SOP's.**
- e. **Prepare the START Activation form and forward a copy to the assigned team leader and the lead investigator for the requesting agency.**
- f. **Ensure that an after-action report is completed and submitted by the START Team Leader.**

4. Requesting Agency Responsibilities

Prior to a START activation request, the requesting agency shall:

- a. **Preserve the integrity of the scene.**
- b. **Maintain or obtain legal right of entry into the fire scene.**
- c. **Contact the START Coordinator to verify the availability of a team.**
- d. **Conduct a pre-activation briefing for the START Coordinator and Team Leader.**
- e. **Designate a lead investigator for the requesting agency for the fire scene who will assist with the investigation until the completion of the activation.**

5. START Team Leader Responsibilities

- a. **The Team Leader shall be responsible for the overall performance of the START while it is activated. He/she shall be responsible for ensuring a controlled and coordinated investigative approach between the requesting agency and START.**
- b. **During the course of the fire investigation, the Team Leader will ensure the involvement of the requesting agency in the investigation to the highest degree possible.**
- c. **The Team Leader once on-site, will ensure that all START personnel are adhering to the established operating procedures.**
- d. **Following the team's withdrawal, the team leader will submit an after action report to the START Coordinator.**
- e. **Notifying team members to respond to activations.**
- f. **Requesting the assistance of an accelerant detection handler/canine team, as appropriate.**
- g. **Serving as or designating the safety officer responsible for the safety of START members at the scene.**
- h. **Attending annual training and seminars that relate to fire investigations and safety.**

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- i. Ensuring that the personnel accountability system is implemented at all scenes.
 - j. Maintaining a member contact roster of team members.
 - k. Overseeing all scene interview and intelligence functions.
 - l. Maintaining liaison with all federal, state and local agencies.
 - m. Arranging for the transportation of START trailers and equipment to callouts.
 - n. Ensuring that all START equipment is inspected annually and that maintenance and inventory records are maintained.
 - o. Ensuring that all used tools and equipment is replenished after each callout.
- 6. Responding Team members responsibilities**
- a. Answering all requests for START callouts from the Team Leader.
 - b. Communicating the request for START callouts with their agency supervisor to receive authorization to respond.
 - c. Maintain active communication with the START Team Leader throughout the callout.
 - d. Complete all tasks and assignments as requested by the START Team Leader.
 - e. Follow all START SOP's while participating in a START callout.
 - f. Provide all contact information to the Team Leader on a timely basis.
 - g. Review and update their Curriculum Vitae on a yearly basis.
- 7. Safety Officer Responsibilities**
- a.