

Although much has been written on the subject of fatal fire investigation, very little has been written on the steps that an incident commander should take before the arrival of an investigating team. Some fire departments may not have the luxury of having an investigator respond with the first alarm assignment. This means that a substantial time delay may occur before an investigating team arrives.

this information may be required.

Avoid unnecessary overhaul. If overhaul operations are required for fire extinguishment, carry them out with the utmost care and with a minimum amount of manpower. If overhaul must be performed in the area of the decedent, "tent" the body to protect it. This can be done with two chairs, a pike pole and a salvage cover. Place a chair at each end of the body. Bridge the chairs

with the pike pole and drape the salvage cover over the pike pole like a tent.

After the fire has been extinguished, scene security should be your next consideration. Unfortunately, fatal fires tend to attract the morbidly curious, thrill seekers, self-appointed investigators and all the local news media. If possible, keep these people at a reasonable distance from the scene by using barrier tape, police patrol units and/or addi-

The Fatal Fire:

If a fire fatality should happen in your community, would the incident commander be prepared to take certain measures to assure that the investigation starts out on the right foot? As with any other fire ground operation, dealing with a fire fatality before the arrival of investigators takes training, preplanning and open communication with the other agencies involved. However, before you establish any guidelines for handling this type of incident, you should seek input from fire investigators, police officials, medical examiners and the district attorney's office to assure that local protocol is followed.

By taking into consideration such things as scene security and preservation of evidence, the incident commander can assist with what may be two individual investigations: investigation of the fire death, and investigation of the cause of the fire.

Tips for the incident commander

First, and most important, if there is any question as to whether a fire victim is deceased, initiate basic life support. Fire fighters involved with the support should try to remember the victim's location, position, dress and appearance prior to starting support. They also should be available for interviews with the investigators. Depending on the circumstances of the fire, the investigators may require a written statement from each fire fighter.

If death is obvious and if the body is in a position where it may be further damaged or destroyed by fire, or if it is in danger due to impending structural collapse, move the body to a safe location inside the structure. If the body is in no danger, don't move it. Movement of the body prior to thorough photographic documentation may make it difficult to establish the decedent's identity, and to discern the events leading to the death. If moving the body is unavoidable, fire fighters performing this task should make it a point to remember the location, position, dress and appearance of the decedent. Interviews and/or written statements about

What to do before the investigators arrive

TOM AURNHAMMER

Captain

Fire Prevention/Investigation,
Farmington Fire Department,
New Mexico




A fire fighter carries out overhaul operations near a "tented" body.

tional fire units.

Seal off the fire building with a police officer and/or a fire fighter posted at each entrance. From this point, follow a local, formalized procedure. In our city it is standard operational procedure that no one enter the structure until investigators from the fire department, the police department, the office of the medical investigator and the district attorney's office meet at the scene for a pre-investigation briefing. After the briefing, the assembled team enters the building for a quick walk-through. After this, another briefing is held in which tasks are assigned. Open communication between the different agencies involved in the investigation is a must. Using the team concept helps eliminate "turf battles." Having SOPs for this type of incident allows the incident commander to notify the appropriate agencies through a fire dispatcher.

If your city or department does not have a fire investigator, the incident commander is often the best qualified person to provide information on the cause of the fire. The incident commander should take note of any code violations found in the building, any blocked egress where entry was forced by fire fighters, or anything that was unusual or out of place. This information needs to be passed on to the investigating team. Information on how the alarm was received and the name of the reporting party should also be passed along.

Summary

In summary, treat a fire fatality scene like a crime scene. The incident commander's major priorities should be life safety, fire extinguishment and the preservation of evidence. Formal SOPs leave no question of what needs to be done. By following these steps, you will be facilitating a smooth, orderly investigation. 

For More Information

Contact the author at the Farmington Fire Department, 301 North Auburn Avenue, Farmington, NM 87401.