

# STRUCTURE FIRES

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## I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND GUIDELINES

The role of the police at a fire scene is to support fire fighting operations by assisting in the preservation of life, protection of property, prevention of crime, establishment of fire lines, control of crowds and direction of vehicular traffic.

Because of the nature of their primary patrol function, especially during the nighttime and early morning hours, the police are often the first to discover a fire, the first on the scene and the first to alert and assist the occupants of a burning building.

Police officers, as part of their regular patrol duties, should note and report any conditions which could constitute a potential fire hazard to the fire department for necessary action.

## II. POLICY

It is the policy of this department to:

- A. Support fire fighting operations by assisting the fire department in isolating access to the fire scene by bystanders and on-lookers, providing fire scene access to fire fighting personnel and equipment, establishing fire lines, controlling crowds, and directing vehicular traffic at fire scenes; and
- B. Cooperate fully and impartially with statutory authorities whose responsibility it is to determine the cause and nature of structure fires.

### III. PROCEDURES

#### ***A. Fire Reporting***

1. Each officer shall familiarize himself/herself with the municipal system for announcing the existence and location of fires.
2. Employees shall also be familiar with the procedure by which railroad trains give notice of fire adjacent to their tracks (one long and three short whistle blasts).<sup>1</sup> This requires the police to investigate and notify the fire department, if necessary.
3. Fires discovered by police officers shall be reported immediately to the fire department.
4. When a fire is reported, the dispatcher shall create and log an incident in the daily log to include:
  - a. The location of the fire; and
  - b. Any other matter of potential importance to units arriving on the scene.
5. If the police department is notified of a fire in person by a citizen, the officer receiving the notification shall:
  - a. Obtain the street location of the fire;
  - b. Request information on the nature of the fire (for example, "wooden dwelling house, upper floor");
  - c. Immediately notify the fire department and relay pertinent information; and
  - d. Request the identity of the citizen reporting the fire.
6. Upon notification of a fire by any means, the dispatcher shall notify the fire department and dispatch officers to the scene of the fire. For further information, see the department policy on ***Communications***.

#### ***B. Responding to a Fire Scene***

1. PRIOR TO ARRIVAL OF FIRE DEPARTMENT
  - a. **Do not block access of fire fighting equipment to the scene with parked police vehicles.**
  - b. Park police vehicles away from the immediate fire scene.
  - c. Take note of the following, as applicable, and notify the fire department:
    - 1) The part of the structure which is on fire and where flames are visible;
    - 2) The volume, color, and location of the heaviest smoke;

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- 3) The direction of the wind, if any;
  - 4) The presence of any odors which suggest gasoline, kerosene, paint thinner or other accelerants may be burning in the fire;
  - 5) Whether any signs of forced entry into the structure are present and whether any windows are broken or left open; and
  - 6) Any hazards which may inhibit access to the scene by firefighters or fire equipment, or best routes of access if known.
- d. Warn inhabitants of any buildings involved by the fire and inform them of adjacent areas to escape and seek refuge. This may be accomplished by use of the siren and public address system in the officer's cruiser.
  - e. Do not attempt to enter a fire-involved building unless doing so is necessary to save human lives, and the risk to the employee's own life is not unreasonable.
    - 1) If the officer decides that entry of the building is necessary, [s]he should not open any door which is hot to the touch, as this indicates the presence of fire inside.
    - 2) Evacuees and the officer in smoky areas should keep their heads low, possibly by crawling on hands and knees, until they are outside the building, in order to avoid inhalation of smoke and toxic gases.
  - f. Prevent any person who has exited a fire-involved building from reentering the building.
  - g. Take reasonable emergency measures to inhibit the spread of the fire without unnecessary risk to the employee, especially if human life is not presently endangered by the fire.
  - h. Police officers must be aware of the possibility of arson and be observant for any person acting suspiciously at a fire scene. Officers should identify and interview:
    - 1) Anyone who arrived at the scene before the first police and fire units; and
    - 2) Anyone who makes mention of having observed any suspicious people in the vicinity.
  - i. If personnel and equipment are available, an officer should videotape or photograph crowds and persons watching the fire and firefighting operations.
2. AFTER ARRIVAL OF FIRE DEPARTMENT
    - a. The ranking firefighter at the scene will normally be the incident commander.

- 1) The first police officer or unit arriving at the scene of the fire shall be in command of other police officers until the arrival of a higher ranking officer.
  - 2) The police commander shall remain accessible to the incident commander.
  - b. After the arrival of fire department personnel, police officers shall not enter a burning building unless:
    - 1) It is absolutely necessary to do so to save a life; or
    - 2) A request to do so is made by a superior officer of the fire department for the performance of a proper police function.
  - c. Cooperation with the fire department is essential. To this end, the police at the scene shall:
    - 1) Establish fire lines and maintain, extend or contract the lines as requested by the fire department, including the closing off of streets whenever necessary;
    - 2) Remove any vehicles within the lines which interfere with the movement of firefighters and their equipment;
    - 3) Ensure that access to hydrants is unobstructed at all times;
    - 4) Prevent vehicles from passing over fire hoses unless directed otherwise by a member of the fire department;<sup>2</sup> and
    - 5) Provide other forms of assistance as requested.
3. CROWD CONTROL
- a. Crowds must be kept a safe distance from the fire. This will ensure the safety of the persons gathered and prevent interference with fire fighting equipment and personnel.
  - b. Police officers shall not permit any person through the fire lines other than:
    - 1) Members of the fire and police departments;
    - 2) Emergency medical personnel;
    - 3) Clergymen whose services are needed within the lines; or
    - 4) Authorized members of the news media who provide proper identification. (See department policy on ***Police Media Relations***.)
  - c. Police officers shall take steps to safeguard fire and police apparatus at the scene. Persons interfering with apparatus or the extinction efforts shall be arrested, if necessary.<sup>3</sup>

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#### 4. FIRE INVESTIGATION

- a. The responsibility for the investigation of fires of incendiary or suspicious origin is with the local fire department officials who may call the State Fire Marshall's Office or the police department for assistance.<sup>4</sup>
- b. The local district attorney's office has jurisdiction for the investigation into any death resulting from a fire. See department policy on ***Dead Bodies***.

#### 5. POST-FIRE RESPONSIBILITIES

- a. Police officers shall remain at the building or dwelling until the fire is extinguished and the area is secured, consistent with their responsibilities to the rest of the community.
- b. Police may be required to remain at the scene:
  - 1) While a search warrant is being sought;
  - 2) Until hazardous situations have been mitigated; or
  - 3) Until the area is secured against looting.

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<sup>1</sup>M.G.L. c. 160, § 237.

<sup>2</sup>M.G.L. c. 89, §7A.

<sup>3</sup>M.G.L. c. 268, §32A.

<sup>4</sup>M.G.L. c. 148, § 2.