

	<b>Standard Operating Guideline</b>	
	<b>SOG Name:</b>	<b>Fire Investigations</b>
	<b>SOG Number:</b>	<b>200.19</b>
	Standard:	TBD
	Guideline Owner:	Non-Emergency Operations
	Implementation Date:	January 13, 2021
	Date of Last Revision:	March 4, 2021
	Authority:	Larry H. Williams, Jr, Fire Chief

**PURPOSE:** The Dothan Fire Department will make every effort to determine the origin and cause of all fires occurring in the City of Dothan. This guideline will establish the criteria for requesting a fire investigator, establishing the responsibilities of a fire investigator, evidence collection, securing of fire incidents, releasing fire response, and investigation information.

## **A. GENERAL**

### **SECTION 1**

All members of the Dothan Fire Department must understand the importance of investigating every fire that occurs in our City. It is our mission to respond to all fires and extinguish them as quickly as possible. In many cases, the results of firefighting may hamper investigations. With this understanding, it is extremely important that firefighters take precautions in protecting evidence while engaging in firefighting operations. Company Officers can assist with determining cause and origin of fires and improve the investigation by completing tasks in an organized approach.

### **SECTION 2**

Information gathered at the scene is of critical importance to the overall investigation. Fire investigators are seldom present while firefighters are engaged in firefighting operations. It is of vital importance that all members understand their roles in protecting and securing evidence and the process for requesting the assistance of a fire investigator to the scene. The company officer and/or the incident commander (IC) must notify a fire investigator when any of the following situations arise:

- a. Fires of unknown cause and/or origin.
- b. Suspected arson, incendiary, or suspicious fires.
- c. Fires resulting in injury or fatalities.
- d. Evidence or suspicions of any crime having occurred in connection with the incident.
- e. Fires in connection with or resulting from an explosion.
- f. Major fires with significant property or monetary losses.
- g. Fires with unusual conditions and locations.
- h. Fires involving suspicious comments or actions of the property owner, occupant, or other associated person.
- i. Fires involving property undergoing renovation, condemnation, for sale, etc.
- j. Incidents that, in the opinion of the Company Officer, may result in a lawsuit or have legal ramifications.

- k. Any situation not specifically mentioned, but in the opinion of the Company Officer, a fire investigator is needed.
- l. Fires involving institutional facilities (hospitals, nursing homes, jails, etc.), government buildings (federal, state, city), or target/high value facilities (substantial dollar loss possible).

## **B. FIRE INVESTIGATION RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **SECTION 1**

All members must understand that knowing the cause of fires helps prevent fires in the future. The firefighters on the scene have the best opportunities to observe evidence of cause and to assist in the fire cause determination effort. From arrival of the first unit, all members at the scene are an important link in determining how a fire started and why it spread. For these reasons, firefighters must be responsible for noting everything that would point to the origin and cause of the fire. It is the responsibility of the Incident Commander (IC) to ensure all fires within the City of Dothan are investigated in accordance with this guideline.

### **SECTION 2**

Company Officers do not need to request the assistance of a fire investigator when the scope of the investigation is limited to origin and cause, and the officer is capable of properly conducting the investigation. Examples of origin and cause include, stove (grease) fires, outdoor fires, vehicle fires, or other fires that present no suspicions of an incendiary act. In such incidents, the IC and/or Company Officer must complete a thorough investigation and document the entire investigative steps taken, including findings, within the narrative of the Fire House (FH) electronic incident report.

### **SECTION 3**

There are incidents that initially require the dispatch of additional resources to adequately investigate the cause and origin of structure fires. Any time the following types of fires occur, the primary fire investigator and the Fire Prevention Chief should be dispatched to effectively conduct on-scene investigations.

- a. Fire resulting in injury or fatalities.
- b. Properties involving damage in excess of \$50,000.
- c. All commercial and special properties to include; state, federal, military properties etc.
- d. Fires in connection with or resulting in explosion.
- e. Suspected arson fires.

### **SECTION 4**

Once on scene, the fire investigator will make a determination if additional investigators are required to assist with the investigation. The fire investigator will be responsible for directing, managing, and conducting all operations during the investigative process as the Investigation Group. The IC will assign personnel to assist the fire investigator with completing the investigation. Below are specific facts related to investigation process. All

members of the Department must be aware of the steps that fire investigators will take in completing the investigation and provide needed assistance to ensure an effective investigation takes place.

- a. A Fire House narrative shall be completed by all responding chiefs, company officers and acting officers involved in the fire incident.
- b. All officers and firefighters must be alert for any scene evidence that may aid in the investigation and the steps to preserve such evidence until it can be properly secured and collected. **Overhaul should be kept to a minimum so as not to disturb evidence.** When overhaul is necessary, operations should attempt to segregate the debris to assist the investigator.
- c. In the event the fire scene is contaminated with hazardous chemicals or presents a physical hazard such as potential structure collapse or other hazardous condition to investigation/company personnel, Command shall ensure the necessary steps are taken in mitigating these hazards prior to allowing entry into the scene for investigative purposes.
- d. When suspicion or knowledge of arson becomes evident, steps should be taken to maintain control of the premises until examination and removal of evidence is completed (i.e. fire department personnel left at the scene).
- e. Dothan Fire Department personnel must not disclose impressions or thoughts as to the cause of the fire where bystanders may overhear them.

### **SECTION 5**

To achieve an orderly process for completing fire investigations, the following steps must be addressed:

- a. Fire Investigators will normally arrive within 30 minutes of request. However, if unforeseen circumstances occur and the response is delayed, Command shall assign personnel to protect the fire scene and maintain custody (in as much as possible with available resources) until the arrival of an investigator or investigating police officer. Any time that a fire investigator's response will be delayed, the investigator must notify the IC with the expected time of arrival.
- b. After achieving fire control and loss stopped, Command may choose to release companies not required to participate in completing fire investigations. In some cases involving lengthy investigation time, companies may be allowed to return to quarters and later return to the scene to complete overhaul activities. This will be coordinated with the investigator(s) in order to maintain control of the fire scene. When deemed appropriate, the IC may transfer Command of the fire to the investigator. A transfer of command briefing will be conducted between the IC and the investigator assuming command. Pertinent information concerning the incident will be passed along during the transfer. The investigator may request from command any staffing, equipment, or additional resources to assist in the investigation. Command will provide these resources to ensure that an effective investigation is completed.
- c. During fire operations, protection of the fire scene and preservation of physical evidence will be a primary concern once the benchmark of "Under Control" is established.

**SECTION 6**

To achieve an orderly process for conducting fire investigations, a systematic approach will be utilized to determine cause and origin using accepted practices.

- a. Upon receiving first notification that an investigator is needed, the investigator should attempt to gather as much information about the fire as possible.
- b. Once on scene, the investigator will report to command and interview the first arriving Company Officer to obtain a report of initial fire conditions.
- c. Observe bystanders and document any suspicious activity. Take crowd photos and interview as necessary.
- d. If observing the crowd is not a concern, the fire investigator should begin the exterior survey.
- e. The exterior of the structure should be examined first. While examining the exterior, work from the area of least damage to the most damaged. All damage should be documented. Including sketches, notes, and photographs (a photo of all sides of the building with the address should be taken if possible).
- f. The interior survey will be completed in the same manner as the exterior survey with photographs taken as necessary.
- g. Once the room of origin has been determined, the room should be systematically cleared of debris and reconstructed as necessary to identify a point of origin. Before and after photographs should be taken. Any evidence found during this process should be properly documented and secured.
- h. If the fire investigator has sufficient cause to believe a crime has been committed, the fire investigation should pause until a police investigator is notified and arrives on-scene of the incident.
- i. In the event of a fire death, the fire investigator must notify a police investigator and the State Fire Marshal.

**C. PROTECTION AND SECURITY OF EVIDENCE AND THE SCENE**

Collecting and preserving evidence to determine fire cause is one of the most important aspects of a successful fire incident investigation. Not only will the evidence be utilized to determine cause and origin and assist us with determining our community fire problem, but evidence will also be used in legal proceedings. Evidence collected at fire incidents is used for various reasons (arson cases, insurance claims, etc.). Remember that the entire fire scene is evidence and it is the responsibility of all members to secure every fire scene until the investigation is complete. The following steps must be achieved in order to protect evidence and the scene during and after a fire:

- a. Evidence shall be protected from destruction or further damage to the extent possible. Evidence presents itself in many forms, to include verbal statements, photos, physical evidence, firefighter's observations, etc. In all cases, prudent attempts shall be made by the company officer and/or fire investigator to protect evidence. If a fire investigator is not

- present at the scene and suspicious circumstances exist, the company officer should request that all evidence be collected and documented by a police officer or crime scene technician.
- b. When possible, physical evidence should be collected with the assistance of a Police Department Crime Scene Investigator. Proper evidence collection techniques must be used and a chain of custody maintained.
  - c. It is essential to properly maintain custody of the scene until release to the property owner or responsible person. A fire department member will be assigned to maintain custody of the scene and not allow unauthorized personnel to enter the area until the Fire Department has completed its investigation.
  - d. Fire-Line-Do-Not-Cross barrier tape will be utilized to secure the scene from unauthorized entry. Do not allow entry of unauthorized persons into the fire scene or removal of building contents (except as may be necessary for urgent situations, i.e.: coats, shoes, wallets/purses, keys, medications, etc.). The Fire Department has the authority to close the scene, even to the owner or occupants.
  - e. It is essential to prevent personnel from unnecessarily walking through the fire/hazard area to avoid walking on evidence.
  - f. It will be the responsibility of the Fire Investigator to complete a search and re-enter waiver for each incident.

#### **D. RELEASING OF INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTATION OF INCIDENT**

##### **SECTION 1**

A fire department member serving as the public information officer (PIO) or the Department's PIO may provide general response information to the media when fires are determined accidental and there is no suspicion of an incendiary fire. When incidents are suspicious in nature or under investigation, no information regarding the origin and/or cause of the fire shall be released. The PIO shall explain to the media that the fire is currently under investigation by the Fire Prevention Division and information regarding the investigation will be released once the investigation is complete. Only the Fire Chief or his designee can authorize the release of investigative findings to the media. All members must refrain from discussing any evidence related issue with non-fire department members. Remember, it may be years following an incident before it appears in court.

##### **SECTION 2**

After an incident, all notes, photographs, and sketches should be finalized and an Origin & Cause report must be prepared and completed in the Fire House reporting system as soon as possible. If the investigator believes that an additional investigation is necessary after review of a fire report, he/she shall take the steps necessary to complete the investigation required.

**SECTION 3**

The Fire Prevention Division is responsible for maintaining all fire investigations records in a thorough and accurate manner. Fire investigative records shall include, but not limited to the following: (All fire records will be placed in a file folder and secured in the fire investigation file cabinet)

- a. A copy of the fire report.
- b. The investigation report.
- c. Witness statements.
- d. Evidence log.
- e. Photograph log.
- f. Any correspondence regarding the investigation.
- g. Any information solicited from other agencies.
- h. A log of what information was released and to whom.
- i. A copy of all radio traffic acquired from dispatch.
- j. All drawings associated with the incident.
- k. Any other pertinent information

**(Signature on File)**

**Larry H. Williams, Jr.**

Fire Chief

DOTHAN FIRE DEPARTMENT