

STRUCTURE FIRES

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I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND GUIDELINES

The role of the police at a fire scene is to furnish close cooperation to the fire department and to assist in the preservation of life, the protection of property, the prevention of crime, the establishment of fire lines, the control of crowds and the direction of vehicular traffic.

Although the fire department is the public agency directly responsible for the handling of fires, the police also have an important part to play. 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 must also be aware of the possibility of arson and be observant for any person acting suspiciously at a fire scene. It should be noted, however, that the basic 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 municipal police department for assistance.¹ The local district attorney's office has jurisdiction for the investigation into any death resulting from a fire. See department policy on **Dead Bodies**.

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

II. **POLICY**

It is the policy of this department to:

- A. Cooperate with the fire department, assist in the preservation of life, the protection of property, the prevention of crime, the establishment of fire lines, the control of crowds and the direction of 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 inform himself/herself of the municipal system for announcing the existence and location of fires. [S]he shall also be familiar with the procedure by which notice of fire adjacent to their tracks is given by railroad trains (one long and three short whistle blasts).² This requires the police to investigate and notify the fire department, if necessary.
- 2. Fires discovered by police officers shall be reported immediately to the fire department through the station house, by radio, or fire box.
- 3. When a fire is reported, the officer shall record:
 - a. The time of alarm; and
 - b. Any other matter of potential importance to units arriving on the scene.
- 4. If the police department is notified of a fire 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.
5. Upon notification of a fire by any means, the dispatcher shall dispatch officers to the scene of the fire.
- a. The police officers shall assist fire personnel at the scene.
 - b. Only police units dispatched to the scene shall respond.

NOTE: If police vehicles follow fire apparatus to a scene, the officers must keep a safe distance behind the apparatus to avoid a collision should a firefighter or piece of equipment fall from the apparatus.

B. Responding to a Fire Scene

1. *Prior to Arrival of Fire Department*

- a. Warn inhabitants of any buildings involved by the fire and 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.
- b. An officer should not attempt to enter a fire involved building unless doing so is necessary to save human lives and the risk to his/her own life is not unreasonable. 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. Evacuees and the officer 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.
- c. Prevent any person who has exited a fire-involved building from reentering the building.

- d. Take reasonable emergency measures to inhibit the spread of the fire without unnecessary risk to himself/herself, especially if human life is not presently endangered by the fire.
- e. To the extent possible, take note of the following and notify the fire department upon arrival:
 - i. The part of the structure which is on fire and where flames are visible;
 - ii. The amount, color and location of the heaviest smoke;
 - iii. The direction of the wind, if any;
 - iv. The presence of any odors which suggest gasoline, kerosene, paint thinner or other accelerants may be burning in the fire; and
 - v. Whether any signs of forced entry into the structure are present and whether any windows are broken or left open.
- f. Such information shall also be noted in the officer's report.

2. ***After Arrival of Fire Department***

- a. After the arrival of fire department personnel, police officers shall not enter a burning building unless:
 - i. It is absolutely necessary to do so to save a life; or
 - ii. A request to do so is made by a superior officer of the fire department for the performance of a proper police function.
- b. The patrol car shall be kept available for communications to facilitate requests for additional aid or to send messages.

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- c. Cooperation with the fire department is essential. To this end, the police at the scene shall: [61.32.(c)]
 - i. Establish fire lines and maintain, extend or contract the lines as requested by the fire department, including the closing off of streets whenever necessary;
 - ii. Remove any vehicles within the lines which interfere with the movement of firefighters;
 - iii. Ensure that access to hydrants is unobstructed at all times;
 - iv. Prevent vehicles from passing over fire hoses unless directed otherwise by a member of the fire department³; and
 - v. Provide other forms of assistance as requested.

3. ***General Responsibilities***

- a. Upon arrival, patrol cars shall be positioned outside the fire lines in such a manner that they do not obstruct the passage of fire or other emergency vehicles. Every precaution shall be taken to avoid vehicles being blocked so that they are unable to further respond.
- b. Additional units dispatched or arriving at the scene shall cover the most appropriate positions for performing all necessary police services.
- c. 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.
- d. After officers have done as much as is reasonably possible to preserve life and to secure the scene for fire fighting personnel, the officers' attention should be directed toward the detection of any suspicious persons or circumstances which might suggest that the fire is the result of a criminal act. Officers should identify and interview anyone who arrived at the scene before the first police and fire units or who make

mention of having observed any suspicious people in the vicinity.

- e. The commanding officer shall designate a location that will serve as a possible command post if it appears police involvement will continue for a long time. Officers arriving at the scene shall report to the command post for orders.
- f. Police officers shall remain at the building or dwelling until it is secured against looting and until the fire is extinguished and the area is secured consistent with their responsibilities to the rest of the community.

4. **Crowd Control**

- a. Crowds, an inevitable element of fires, shall be kept a safe distance from the fire. This will ensure the safety of the persons gathered and prevent interference with the fire department.
- b. Police officers shall not permit any person through the fire lines except members of the fire and police departments, emergency medical personal, clergymen whose services are needed within the lines or authorized members of the news media who provide proper identification. (See departmental 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.⁴

¹M.G.L. c. 148, s. 2

²M.G.L. c. 160, s. 237

³M.G.L. c. 89, s. 7A

⁴M.G.L. c. 268, s. 32A