Bath Township Fire Department			Standard Operating Guideline	
Section **Operations**	**Referral No.** **O-21**	**Subject:** **Fire Scene Investigation**	**Date Issued** **4/08**	**Date Revised**

Purpose:

- To ensure the investigation of all fires occurring within Bath Township.
- To initiate a system of fire investigation which begins at company level and progresses to upper organizational levels, as necessary, based on the situation involving an emergency incident.
- To establish guidelines for assistance to determine the origin and cause, resulting in who or what was responsible and reasons for the occurrence.
- To provide policy and guidelines relative to the fire investigation process at the company level.

Scope:

- This standard operating guideline shall apply to all personnel.

Responsibilities:

- Officer
  - The officer will ensure completion of a complete and thorough cause & origin investigation of all fires
  - Ensure the safety of personnel while performing the investigation
- Personnel
  - Any person completing the investigation will be responsible for accurate and timely completion of the investigation report
  - All personnel will operate in a safe manner while performing the investigation.

Guidelines:

- It shall be policy to make every effort to determine the origin and cause of all fires.
- Company Officers and Investigators should be systematic and organized using acceptable practices. (NFPA 921 shall be used as a guide)
- Company Officers shall initiate the investigation of those fires that they respond to.
- Company Officers shall request a fire investigator via the IC (Officer in charge of the scene) whenever any of the following circumstances exist:
  - Arson, unknown origin and/or unknown cause, or suspicious fires.
  - The presence of incendiary plants, trailers, or devices (electrical, chemical, mechanical).
  - Multiple origins or un-communicated fires.
  - Prior or habitual fires.
  - Fires at unusual and suspicious hours.

- Fires preceded by apparent preparation, such as the removal of contents or absence of contents that are usually found in that type of occupancy.
- Fires that burn or injure the occupants.
- Unusual conditions and locations of burnings.
- Suspicious comments and actions of the occupant.
- Condemned property or proceedings for removal of a structure.
- Fires prior to or during redecoration or renovation.
- Fires where damaged or pre-burned contents are found.
- Fires of property listed for sale.
- Fires discovered by habitual persons.
- Fires possibly connected to riots, racial, or civil disturbance.
- Fires recently preceded by acts of vandalism.
- Evidence or suspicions of any crime having occurred in connection with the emergency incident.
- Fires resulting in fatalities/injuries of any persons.
- Fires in connection or resulting from an explosion.
- Major fires with significant property or monetary losses.
- Fires that cause significant damage to Fire Department equipment and/or apparatus.
- Incidents that may result in a lawsuit or have legal ramifications.
- Any situation not specifically mentioned, but in the opinion of the Company Officer, a fire investigation is needed.

- Whenever a fire investigator has been requested and dispatch is unable to contact an investigator, the Company Officer shall request the response of the Fire Chief or the State Fire Marshall Arson Bureau.

Responsibility:

- It is the responsibility of the IC to make certain that the on-scene fire investigation is being conducted.
- The IC or Company Officers, that are conducting a fire investigation, are responsible for requesting a fire investigator whenever such circumstances may exist.
- It is the responsibility of all Officers and Firefighters to be alert for any evidence, which may aid in the investigation and 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.
- 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).

- Personnel should not disclose impressions or thoughts as to the cause of the fire where bystanders may overhear them.

Procedure:

- During firefighting operations, be alert for conditions that may indicate incendiaries.
- Initiate fire investigation procedures as soon as possible after knockdown and before overhaul.
- Endeavor, first, to determine point of origin.
- Endeavor to determine cause of fire and/or explosion.
- Conduct overhaul operations with care as directed by the Officer-in-Charge during the investigation activities.
- Preserve all evidence that may be found.
- Request a fire investigator, as per this guideline.
- Secure overhaul operations as far as may be practical until the arrival of the investigator. Note: If overhaul is needed and it is practical, taking a photograph(s) prior to overhauling is advised.
- Observe owners/occupants and bystanders reactions and comments. Pay attention to their clothing and its conditions (i.e. are they dressed for what they say they were doing?).
- Personnel shall document the description, identification of any witnesses and potential witnesses present at the scene.
- Written statements should be taken from such if attainable.
- Personnel should document the license numbers of any vehicles present at the fire scene if arson is suspected.
- If there has been a series of fires, pay attention to the people at the scene. Who reported the fire? Who attempted rescue or suppression, and who offered information? Try to observe the reaction of the crowd. Get a photograph of the crowd if possible, including vehicles.
- All fireground personnel should note bystanders at the scene of a fire.
- Photographs of the crowd should be encouraged at all major fires. Noting license plate numbers of vehicles parked at the scene or those leaving as the FD arrives can also provide valuable information to investigators.

Fire Investigator:

- First Notice of Investigator
    - Upon receiving the first notification that an investigator is needed, the investigator should attempt to gather as much information about the fire as possible

- Some of the information the investigator should gather is:

1. Location of fire.
2. Time of fire.
3. Unit or agency requesting investigator.
4. If there are any fire department units on the scene.
5. Location and designation of the Command Post.
6. Whether the fire is suspicious.
7. If there are any injuries or fatalities.
8. If law enforcement is on the scene.

- The investigator should urge the IC to limit any overhaul until the investigator has had a chance to observe the scene.
- On Scene:
  - It may be beneficial to the investigation if, when, the investigator arrives on the scene if he/she is not in uniform to mix in with the crowd, observe bystanders reactions, take crowd photos, and begin the exterior survey (it would be advisable to inform the IC of this prior to arriving on the scene).
- If observing the crowd is not a concern then the investigator should report directly to Command Post.
- Investigation Survey:
  - Exterior Survey – the exterior of the structure should be examined first. While examining the exterior, work from the area of least damage to the most damage. All damage should be documented. Including sketches, notes, and photographs (a photo of the building with the address should be taken if possible).
  - Interior Survey – The interior survey is conducted in the same manner as the exterior survey.
  - Area of origin/room of origin reconstruction - once the room or area of origin has been located, the room should be systematically cleared of debris and reconstructed as close as possible to clearly show all fire burn patterns. Before and after photographs should be taken. Any evidence found during this process should be properly documented, and secured.
- Note: All documentation should be completed in rough form prior to leaving the scene, unless extenuating circumstances or legal requirements dictate otherwise.

Discovery of Arson:

*By law the Fire Department is allowed to search for the **Cause and Origin** of a fire without a criminal search warrant. Any possible evidence of arson (i.e. milk jugs filled with accelerant) may be removed and secured for evidence provided it was in plain view and was discovered during firefighting and/or overhaul operations, or while determining the cause and origin of a fire, or if there is a danger that such evidence may be destroyed if left in place. Once the IC has sufficient cause to believe that a crime has been committed, he must obtain a criminal search warrant or obtain written consent from a person authorized to give consent (a Police Investigator may be helpful with obtaining this)*

Post Incident:

- After an incident all notes, photographs, and sketches should be finalized and an investigators report should be prepared and submitted as soon as possible.
- A preliminary report should be submitted to the Deputy Fire Chief within (5) five working days, and should be updated every (30) thirty days until the case is closed.
- The fire investigator should review all fire reports.
- If the investigator believes that additional investigation is necessary after reviewing a fire report, he/she should initiate one.
- If a fire is investigated and determined to be accidental then a fire cause supplement should be submitted with the fire report.

Record Keeping:

- Thorough and accurate records should be kept on all fires that are investigated.
- The records should include:
    - A copy of the Fire Report.
    - The Investigation Report.
    - Witness Statements.
    - Evidence Log.
    - Photograph Log.
    - Any correspondence regarding the investigation.
    - Any information solicited from other agencies.
    - A log of what information was released and to whom.
- All patient information shall be considered confidential.