

Procedures for Handling Fires Involving Fatalities

331.1 PURPOSE

All death scenes or possible death scenes are to be approached with caution to avoid damaging or destroying possible evidence relating to cause of death. If there is even a slight chance that the victim is alive, then medical treatment should be initiated, and the victim transported to the nearest medical facility.

If there is a fatality, and it is obvious that the victim's life support functions have terminated, then the following procedures should be activated.

The risk exists that a fatality fire is a homicide, with the fire being used as a means to cover the criminal act. As a result, fatality fires are jointly investigated by the fire and police department, with the police department as the lead investigative agency until a homicide is ruled out. To this end, fire personnel will need to coordinate activities with the police department related to the investigation.

331.2 PROCEDURES

Procedures to be followed when a fatality has been discovered:

1. Treat all fire fatality scenes as if they are a homicide. The investigation component of the fire fatality will be under the direction and control of the Police Department until a homicide has been ruled out. The fire investigator will work closely with the police investigator and CID personnel on scene.
2. It is the responsibility of the Company Officer or Incident Commander to protect the victim and secure the scene for the Investigators.
3. Notify the Fire Alarm Office of the fatality discovery.
4. The Fire Alarm Office shall immediately notify:
 - a. The Fire Chief, Assistant Chief, and the Fire Marshal
 - b. The on-call Fire Investigator
 - c. The Medical Examiner
 - d. CID crime scene officer
 - e. The PD patrol supervisor
 - f. On call CID Investigator
 - g. CID Commander
5. The Fire Alarm Office shall secure an activity response number (AR#) from the Police Department referencing the call. If an offense is suspected, an offense report is prepared.

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6. If the victim is obviously deceased, do not disturb the body until cleared to do so by the Medical Examiner or other member of the Investigative staff, i.e. Fire Marshal, Fire Investigator, or Police Department crime scene officer, investigator or supervisor.
7. Secure the immediate area. Use fire barrier tape, or rope to cordon off the fire scene and surrounding area. Place a guard near the room or place where the body was discovered. This is to ensure minimal disturbance while conducting other necessary fire ground activities. The person assigned to guard the room shall maintain a log of all personnel who enter the room or area where the fatality is found. This person shall record the name, time in and out, and duties of all persons who enter the room or area. If it is necessary to protect the body from falling debris or other items, place a clean white sheet over the victim. Cover the sheet with a clean plastic sheet and cover that with a salvage tarp. Do not place a used salvage tarp directly on the victim if at all possible. The sheet/plastic/tarp combo is the best method to preserve the evidence on the victims' body.
8. Secure or attempt to secure the identity of the victim. Do not disturb the victim or the surrounding area to obtain this information until/unless cleared to do so by the medical examiner or investigator.
 - a. Name, date of birth, sex, race, age, etc.
 - b. The names and locations of relatives, employer, etc.
9. Locate and detain all witnesses. If a witness can not be detained, try to obtain contact information including name, date of birth, address, drivers license number and at least two phone numbers. Do not physically detain a witness. Seek police assistance as necessary.
10. The Company Officer in-charge shall be responsible for all information pertaining to where the body was found (position and location), who found the body, or other circumstances, or events surrounding the body's discovery.
11. The Fire Chief or his designee shall be responsible for any press release information. All inquiries as to identity of the victim or other circumstances of the incident shall be directed to the Fire Chief or a member of the Administrative Staff.
12. All personnel on the scene of a fatality fire should prepare a written supplement directed to the Fire Marshal indicating their actions and observations at the fire scene. This report is to be completed within 72 hours of the incident. Exceptions to this may be granted by the Fire Marshal.
13. If it is necessary to protect a victim in place, the following procedure should be used
 - a. The body may be covered with a clean, white sheet. If the body is located in an interior area subject to further contamination, the sheet should be covered with a clean plastic sheet if available and covered with a top layer consisting of a clean salvage tarp. The sheet provides a clean surface for removal of minute pieces of evidence that may cling to the sheet and as an easily eliminated source of fiber contamination at the scene.

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The plastic tarp help protect the sheet from water and airborne contaminants and the tarp provides physical protection to the body and the immediate area surrounding it.

b. Covering or uncovering the body should be done only under the direction of the fire or police investigator or medical examiner whenever possible.

c. Post a guard to secure the area. No unnecessary personnel should be in the secured area except as necessary for fire suppression and related immediately necessary functions. If safety conditions prevent a guard from being posted, other reasonable steps should be taken to protect the scene.