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Report of the Week

Aren't propane cylinders usually white?
05/12/2011

Report Number: 09-0000982

Report Date: 11/12/2009 16:33

Synopsis

Meth lab indicators missed on initial assessment.

Demographics

Department type: Paid Municipal

Job or rank: Assistant Chief

Department shift: 24 hours on - 48 hours off

Age: 43 - 51

Years of fire service experience: 21 - 23

Region: FEMA Region VI

Service Area: Urban

Event Information

Event type: On-duty activities: apparatus and station maintenance, meetings, tours, etc.

Event date and time: 11/06/2009 00:00

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Clear and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- SOP / SOG
- Decision Making
- Training Issue
- Situational Awareness

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Life threatening injury
- Environmental

Event Description

Our local parks board was collecting refuse along park jurisdiction and came across three full propane cylinders. There were two 5 gallon and one 20 gallon in size and each at a different trash barrel. They picked them up at the site and took them back to the Parks Office. The FD was called and asked if they wanted the propane for department use. The company officer felt it was in the best interest of the department to use the propane for extinguisher training with the FD Fire Marshal's public education program.

Upon returning to the station, the company officer closely examined the cylinders. They had been painted black and the handles had been bent back. There was also deterioration to the valve assembly with a change of color noted.

Aren't propane cylinders usually white?

1 of 4

A propane wand was attached to check for propane and it was determined that it was anhydrous ammonia. They immediately contacted fire administration to report the tanks.

The crew was ordered to take the tanks away from inside the station bay and the fire marshal's office was given lead problem solving. City drug task force was notified, who in turned notified County drug task force and [federal officials]. The [Feds] responded, confirmed the chemical, and identified it as production quality chemical for crystal methamphetamine. They properly disposed of the tanks with federal dollars instead of fire department funds.

Lessons Learned

Policy:

It was known that employees do not bring hazardous materials into the stations, but policy had missed repeating the standard through revisions over the years. Administration must make it clear in writing how to handle hazardous material calls.

Decision Making:

Honest firefighters make honest mistakes. The company officer trusted the parks department that it was propane and brought it back to the station. He thought he was saving the department money and helping a fellow agency with their problem. This incident is being made into a training class to teach other firefighters on proper decision making and hazardous materials.

Situational Awareness:

Propane is often overlooked as a hazardous material because everybody uses it. Failing to recognize a modified propane cylinder until it was brought into the station could have caused serious injury to life and property. Earlier this year, an amputation occurred but firefighters were told it was from heavy machinery. When the PD showed up to the station on this particular event, they told firefighters that the amputation was from a fractured/modified propane cylinder that was filled with anhydrous ammonia. The PD had never told the FD the outcome from the amputation. Otherwise, we may have been aware that crystal methamphetamine production is a reoccurring problem in our city.

Training:

It has been a long time since we addressed clandestine drug labs other than simple handouts to the stations. Reality hit us hard and thus we are contacting our local DEA office to schedule training.

Lessons:

People rarely call the fire department to give them useful things. The most important lesson was that serious injury could have occurred during the transport and examination of these modified tanks. We also learned that we had a serious training lapse with hazardous materials recognition and drug manufacturing.

These tanks were holding an estimated \$500,000 of street value production content. They were probably left as a manufacturing drop to be picked up later by a contact. If a company officer ever finds this again, they should immediately notify the PD and their supervisor for direction. If [federal officials] had not properly disposed of the tanks, the local contractor cost for removal of an

unknown chemical in a modified tank would have exceeded \$5,000. Our budget could not have comfortably handled this cost. Because of this event, the fire department administration has started an active review of department policies for errors, omissions, and updating.

Report of the Week

Sometimes the gift horse needs to be inspected closely. The word "Free" can have unusual tentacles attached that can spell trouble to the unsuspecting recipient. One of the first clues to trouble is often an "unresolved discrepancy" in something we are examining. This week's ROTW, [09-982](#), takes us to just such a situation.

"Our local parks board was collecting refuse along park jurisdiction and came across three full propane cylinders. There were two 5 gallon and one 20 gallon in size and each at a different trash barrel... The FD was called and asked if they wanted the propane for department use. The company officer felt it was in the best interest of the department to use the propane for extinguisher training with the FD Fire Marshal's public education program.

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The appearance of a recognizable object (i.e., propane cylinders) in an unusual setting or set of circumstances (i.e., painted black, scattered at different locations in the same vicinity), is known as an "unresolved discrepancy." While propane cylinders are frequently encountered objects, several cylinders painted black and scattered throughout a park setting should start the warning notices coming from the voice in the back of one's mind. The key is to recognize that "this just doesn't look or feel right" sensation and react to it. The subconscious, where our most primal (and some say powerful) sense of safety lies, rarely steers us wrong. Once you have reviewed the entire content of [09-982](#), and reviewed the related reports, consider the following:

1. Have you had any training on recognizing drug paraphernalia or elements of a crystal methamphetamine lab?
2. What was *your first* reaction to the elements and setting in this week's ROTW?
3. To what can you attribute your reaction to? Be specific (e.g., training, "just didn't sound normal," etc.)
4. Using the DOT ERG book, look up anhydrous ammonia. Review the characteristics, hazard mitigation and safety information. Is your company/department capable of taking care of all of the recommendations?
5. If you walked into your station and found the cylinders in the apparatus room, what steps would you take?

No community is immune from the proliferation of meth labs. Easily obtained common ingredients, low overhead and high resale value make the manufacture

of crystal meth a risk any firefighter can encounter. Education on recognition and an emphasis on paying attention to the “voice in the back of one’s head” will assist emergency responders in minimizing exposure to hazards that exceed our protective equipment capability.

Related Reports – Topical Relation: Meth Labs

[09-868](#) [10-1040](#) [11-144](#) [11-145](#)

Have you encountered meth lab materials during the course of your duty? Submit your report to www.firefighternearmiss.com today so everyone goes home tomorrow.

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.