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Report of the Week

Do you smell gas?

5/14/09

Report Number: 09-063

Report Date: 01/26/2009 1535

Synopsis

"Routine" gas odor actually a suicide attempt.

Demographics

Department type: Paid Municipal

Job or rank: Fire Fighter

Department shift: 48 hours on - 96 hours off

Age: 34 - 42

Years of fire service experience: 4 - 6

Region: FEMA Region VIII

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: Non-fire emergency event: auto extrication, technical rescue, emergency medical call, service calls, etc

Event date and time: 12/02/2008 1400

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Cloudy and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- Decision Making
- Individual Action
- Communication

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Life threatening injury

Event Description

We were dispatched as the second engine on a smell of natural gas in the area. We arrived second and were initially tasked by Command with checking the street/houses to the southeast of the intersection for a natural gas leak. We took our combustible gas detector and started checking the outside gas valves on the houses and talking to anyone we came into contact with, trying to determine a cause for the odor. After several minutes we were asked by Command to come to the street that they were on (the direction of the wind making this the most likely area for the leak) and assist his firefighter who was going house to house on that street looking for a source for the leak.

As we started checking the houses, I noted a gentleman who came out of his house (closest to the strongest odor of gas) and sat on his front porch and lit a cigarette. I thought to myself that I wasn't too comfortable with him doing this, but didn't feel I had a right to go onto his property and insist he stop smoking. I also believed that because the leak was probably outside, the chances of his cigarette igniting the gas was minimal. I continued down the street looking for the source of the leak.

The other firefighter on my engine had gone up to the house where the gentleman was sitting to check the outside gas meter. He noticed that the dials were moving very fast and found this to be unusual so he approached the man and asked if he smelled gas in his house. The man said he didn't and allowed the firefighter to step into the house and check for a smell of gas. While the firefighter was doing this, the man walked into his garage through a man-door and came out saying he thought he found the leak. When the firefighter went into the garage through a man door, he noted a VERY STRONG odor of gas and called myself and our officer over. By this time the man had put out his cigarette. We found that there was a 1/2" pipe coming out of a wall with a quarter-turn valve that had been turned on.

At this point we asked the man to go across the street for his safety. He didn't initially comply. The three of us began to discuss the need to open the garage door and ventilate the garage. While discussing this, the man reached in and hit the garage door button and the door started opening. At this point we told the man that what he did was very dangerous and that he needed to go across the street and he eventually complied, going into a neighbor's house.

We started to dissipate the gas with a PPV fan and the IC called for the local Sheriff's Department to respond. We went into the house to ensure that the gas had not leaked into the house. While doing this we noted a suicide note on the kitchen table. We also noted tools in the garage and tools and a pack of cigarettes downstairs by the hot water heater, indicating the man had tried to create a leak at the hot water heater before going into the garage.

The call ended well with the man being taken into custody on a mental health hold, the gas meter being locked out by the gas company, and the owner of the house being contacted about what had happened; the man was a renter.

Lessons Learned

I feel like we learned several lessons from this call. The first thing we learned is whenever there is a gas leak ensure that any and all possible ignition sources are dealt with, for our safety and the safety of our citizens. In the future, if we see someone smoking we need to insist that they put out their cigarette until told everything is clear and they are allowed to smoke again. It is our responsibility to the crews we work with and the citizens we serve to ensure that there is a minimal chance that the leaking gas can ignite.

Another lesson learned was to be more forceful in dealing with the public, getting them to do what needs to be done for their safety and ours. We had asked the man to move across the street prior to him opening the garage door but were not as insistent as we should have been to ensure he complied with our directions.

A lesson I learned was to listen to my gut. My gut told me something was wrong with this man sitting on his porch and smoking a cigarette, but I didn't listen and investigate further. I never could have conceived that this man was trying to kill himself and was willing to take us with him, but I now know that anything is possible.

Lastly, as these tough economic times continue to get worse, people are going to get more and more desperate and will resort to drastic measures to try to bring an end to their situation. Our senses need to be more heightened and we need to be thinking about the worst possible scenario when responding to routine calls. Be more aware of our surroundings and when something looks wrong or out of place, it's probably because it is!

Discussion Questions

What we see and hear is not always what we get. Natural gas is treated with mercaptan, a non-toxic chemical that contains sulfur, so gas can be detected. Mercaptan has many of the same properties as natural gas which makes mercaptan the perfect odorant. Only a few parts per million are necessary to make natural gas detectable. The stronger the odor, the larger the concentration of gas. Metering is the most effective means of determining the concentration of natural gas in an atmosphere. Once you have read the entire account of 09-063 and reviewed the related reports, consider the following to improve your knowledge of natural gas emergencies:

1. Is your department's response to reported gas leaks adequate to check multiple blocks simultaneously?
2. When was the last time your gas meter was calibrated?
3. At your last meter reading drill, did you cover the meaning of the percentages and parts per million measured on the meter?
4. What is your minimum required PPE for gas leak calls? Is that level adequate to protect you from a flash fire?
5. What is the average response time of your local gas company?

Related Reports

05-369

06-407

07-985

08-594

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.