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Report of the Week

**First you're out; then you're in. Next you know,
the floor caves in.**

07/22/2010

Report Number: 10-0000651

Report Date: 03/31/2010 00:25

Synopsis

Crews enter after defensive fire called.

Demographics

Department type: Combination, Mostly volunteer

Job or rank: Fire Fighter

Department shift: 12 hour days, 12 hour nights

Age: 34 - 42

Years of fire service experience: 14 - 16

Region: FEMA Region V

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: Fire emergency event: structure fire, vehicle fire, wildland fire, etc.

Event date and time: 03/22/2010 18:30

Hours into the shift: 13 - 16

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Clear with Wet Surfaces

Do you think this will happen again? Yes

What were the contributing factors?

- Human Error
- Training Issue
- Decision Making
- Command
- Situational Awareness

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Lost time injury
- Minor injury
- Life threatening injury
- Property damage

Event Description

Units were dispatched to smoke coming from the window air conditioner unit on the second floor of a single family structure. Units arrived on scene and found an abandoned/vacant building that was boarded up (first floor only) with the exception of the side door (side B) that was open. Units arrived on scene in a reasonable amount of time (within 3-5 minutes) and observed the front second floor bedroom on fire, with heavy smoke and fire coming from the front windows and the gutter line. It was reported the first due truck secured accountability, command, and operations.

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The next vehicle on scene was shortly behind the first and was an engine co. from a neighboring city (a more aggressive, trained, and experienced department and crew). The second vehicle (engine co) entered the structure and advanced an inch and three quarter hand line through the open side door (side B) to the second floor. After being inside the house for a short time (a few minutes, less than 5) they reported the fire was in the front room and in the attic and they were not going to be able to access the attic.

At that time, they reported to operations they were backing out and "this was a loser." Operations acknowledged the interior crew, "This was a loser, and they were backing out," and advised other units to stand by to go to defensive operations pending the interior crew exiting the structure. The crew made it out without incident and the other crews on scene went to defensive operations.

Approximately 8-10 minutes went by and crews were permitted to re-enter the structure and advance to the second floor to continue fire attack, pull ceilings and chase and extinguish the fire in the attic space. Crews were permitted in the front room on the second floor for fire attack and suppression. The front room on the second floor was the room with the main fire damage and the heaviest fire.

During fire attack in the front room on the second floor, one of the firefighters fell through the floor in a spot where the floor was burned out. The firefighter did not fall all the way through to the first floor due to being caught by the floor joist and the debris on the second floor. Because of falling through the floor, the firefighter did receive minor bruising to his legs due to the fall and being caught by the floor joist. Interior fire attack crews involved in the incident reported the unstable floor and the holes in the floor and advised other crews on scene not to enter the front room on the second floor due to the unsecure floor. The fire was eventually completely extinguished and the scene was secured.

Lessons Learned

Number 1: It is up to everyone on the fire scene to size up the structure and determine if it is worth risking firefighter's lives for interior fire attack in structures that are abandoned, boarded up, and have little or no value to start with. The officer on every crew needs to determine if it is worth risking killing him/herself or his/her crew for already lost or worthless property.

Number 2: Once command or an operations chief makes the decision to go to defensive operations and not commit crews to interior fire attack, they need to stay out of the structure and not re-enter, especially if the property has no value, little value, or is abandoned to start with.

Number 3: Stay out of loser structures or structures that aren't worth saving in the first place. Just because we are firefighters doesn't mean we have to rush in and do something foolish. Safety first, the risk is NOT worth the reward.

The fire fighter was not seriously injured. He did not fall through the floor all the way. In my opinion, this was due to the building materials of the structure. This building was built in the late 1800s and was built with true two-by framing materials and most likely built with virgin wood. The floor was also constructed with tongue and groove three quarter by four sub-flooring and covered with vinyl tile and then carpet (in spots). The walls and ceiling were constructed with

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plaster and lath and appeared to be original to the structure. These things combined contributed to the slowing down and containment of the fire to the front room on the second floor and the maintaining of the integrity of the structure's framing.

If the structure was built with the lighter weight building materials of today or even the last 20 to 30 years, this incident could have ended up with a serious injury or a fatality, not to mention a complete structural loss.

Discussion Questions

Age, deterioration, and vandalism: these are three of the most notable conditions found at vacant structures. Once a structure is left vacant, there is no telling when the structure reaches its uninhabitable state. However, from the moment the last board is screwed in or nailed over the windows and doors, the risk to the firefighter entering the structure escalates at an exponential rate. Once you have read the entire account of [10-651](#) and the related reports, consider the following:

1. Should vacant structures be entered if defensive operations are needed to control the fire? Explain your answer.
2. Does your department have a "rules of engagement*" policy?
3. How many vacant structures are in your first run district? Second run district?
4. Who in your local government is responsible for monitoring and demolishing vacant structures?
5. Does your department employ a marking system to identify vacant structures that are "no go" structures for interior firefighting?

Related Reports – Topical Relation: Vacant Structures.

[05-618](#) [06-231](#) [07-1152](#) [08-327](#) [09-085](#)

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.