U.S. Fire Administration
Working for a fire-safe America

Protecting Homes Against Arson

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FEMA

According to the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), there are an estimated 15,900 intentionally set fires in homes every year, resulting in 295 deaths, 675 injuries and $491 million in direct property damage. The average dollar loss for an intentionally set fire in a residential building is $30,880. The fatality rate for intentionally set residential fires is more than twice that of other residential building fires. (Data Source: USFA Fire Estimate Summary Series.)

Arson robs communities of its valuable assets, lives and property. Arson destroys more than buildings; it can devastate a community resulting in the decline of the neighborhood through increased insurance premiums, loss of business revenue, and a decrease in property values.

The fire service can help communities reduce the occurrence of arson and reduce its devastating effect by making residents aware of these measures to safeguard their homes.

Illuminate Exterior and Entrances

Install lights covering all sides of the house. Motion-activated lighting, which is inexpensive, should be placed near the entrances. Interior lights on timers give the illusion that a residence is occupied.

Clear Obstructions

Trim or remove shrubbery that blocks the view of the house from the street. During the growing season, bushes and trees may need to be trimmed frequently.

Install Burglar and Fire Alarm Systems

Alarm devices can be inexpensively wired to transmit an alarm to the police or fire department. Check the cost of contracting with a security firm for response to alarms.

Install Smoke Alarms and a Fire Sprinkler System

The combination of working smoke alarms and home fire sprinklers reduces the likelihood of death from fire by more than 82 percent. The most effective fire loss prevention and reduction measure for both life and property is the installation and maintenance of fire sprinklers.

Keep Doors and Windows Locked

All external doors should be equipped with dead bolts. A simple locked door could be the deterrent that saves a house from arson. The hardware used to lock windows can sometimes be easily forced open using a credit card or other tool. The best type of window hardware has spring-loaded bolts that insert through the window frame into the wall frame.

Clean House

Oftentimes, arson is a crime of opportunity. Remove excess vegetation and piles of leaves. Clean around your house and garage, removing unused and unneeded paper, trash, cleaning supplies, partial cans of paint and other materials that could become kindling and fuel a fire for an arsonist.

Clean Up Vacant Homes

Secure abandoned and vacant homes, which are potential arson targets. This may include adding additional locks or boarding up broken windows or other openings with plywood. Remove abandoned vehicles. Most car fires are started to cover up other criminal activity or simply as an act of vandalism.

Communicate with the owner that authorities are concerned about the vacant home and explain why. Contact public works to disconnect all utilities at the street. This includes natural gas, water and electricity. If there are liquefied petroleum gas tanks, they should be disconnected and removed. Encourage Neighborhood Watch members to patrol these areas and write down descriptions, license plates of suspicious vehicles, and potential suspect descriptions.

Establish a Community Arson Watch Program

Follow the successful Neighborhood Watch five-step program model provided here.

Step 1
Analyze the specific local problem and collect related data.

Step 2
Build a partnership between fire and emergency services, the police and other law enforcement agencies, and the residents.

Step 3
Assess the needs of your neighborhood and determine which problems to focus on and the methods used to address them.

Step 4
Train a dynamic group of volunteers, led by organized and motivated leaders.

Step 5
Develop meaningful projects specific to the identified problem.

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