



RUSSELLVILLE FIRE DEPARTMENT  
POLICY MANUAL

Policy Number:  
Section:  
Original Date:  
Revised Date:

## **PURPOSE**

The determination of fire origin and cause is necessary for all fire incidents. The purpose of this Policy is to investigate fire incidents as accurately and efficiently as possible.

## **POLICY**

The Officer in Charge is responsible for determining when a Fire Investigator is needed. This determination is dependent on the information gathered at the scene and/or circumstances of the fire. The on-duty Fire Investigators are available through Dispatch and Deployment or by phone to consult with Command prior to or during response to assist Command.

A fire investigation is conducted after fire control and salvage activities are completed, but before overhaul actions, which could hinder the investigation.

### **Dispatch**

A Fire Investigator dispatched by Dispatch and Deployment or called by the Officer in Charge, will respond to the scene reference the following circumstances:

1. Fire deaths or serious fire injuries
2. All working first alarm or greater structure fires
3. Fires for which the cause cannot be determined by Command on the scene
4. Explosions and bombings
5. Requested by Russellville Police Department to respond to known arson fires
6. Car, field, or dumpster fires that have an identified lead or suspect in custody
7. Attempted arsons

### **Non-Dispatch**

A Fire Investigator is not needed for the following situations. The company officer is responsible for completing an accurate Incident Report to document the fire cause:

1. Minor fires where cause is determined to be accidental
2. Scalding burns, electrical accidents, and minor accidental burn injuries

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3. Car fires originating in the engine area during vehicle operation, abandoned autos, or vehicle arsons with no identified suspects
4. Minor grass, fence, or trash fires with no witnesses or suspects
5. Traffic accident fatalities involving fire subsequent to collision (investigated by RPD)
6. To hold the scene until another agency or service responds
7. When requested to make contact with homeowner for the purpose of insurance matters
8. Minor fires caused by juveniles playing with fire, matches, etc. (402.10 Youth Firesetting)

If an incident is determined to be of a minor nature (e.g. accidental, no injuries, slight fire damage) and the cause can be determined by the Company Officer on scene through the information gathered at the scene and/or circumstances of the fire, units on the scene shall gather the information needed and to accurately complete the required report.

### **Fire Scene Coordination**

When a Fire Investigator is on the scene or responding, companies will delay non-essential overhaul and secure the fire scene until the Fire Investigator arrives. Salvage and all unnecessary interim activities which may alter, contaminate the fire scene, or interfere with a subsequent origin and cause investigation must be discontinued until authorized to continue by the responding Fire Investigator.

Command will assign personnel to protect and maintain custody of the fire scene until the arrival of a Fire Investigator, especially when a delay in response has been indicated by the responding Fire Investigator.

After achieving fire control, Command may release companies not required for the completion of the investigation and/or overhaul. In some cases, involving lengthy investigations, companies may return to quarters and later respond back to the scene to complete overhaul activities when requested by the Fire Investigator.

Command will turn over jurisdiction of the fire area to the Fire Investigator as soon as possible after the fire is stabilized. The Investigator retains jurisdiction of the scene until it is released back to Command. The Fire Investigator may inform Command they need to maintain custody of the scene for further investigation.

The Investigator will request from Command any personnel or equipment necessary for the investigation. Command will make every attempt to meet such requests, to the extent possible under the prevailing circumstances.

All personnel shall cooperate with the Fire Investigator. Protection of the fire scene and preservation of physical evidence is a primary concern once life safety and fire control are achieved.

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An attempt to identify the victims and witnesses at the fire scene will be made as soon as possible, and will not be delayed until the Fire Investigator is on the scene. Obtaining the identification of victims and witnesses is critical to the investigative process.

### **Preservation of Evidence**

Every fire scene contains evidence. Fire fighting operations present the greatest potential for damage to evidence, which may be used by the Fire Investigators and the Police Department in subsequent court cases and prosecution.

Evidence of fire cause is rarely destroyed by fire. The form, shape, color, size, and weight of items may be altered, but evidence can still be identified upon trained examination. It is imperative to preserve evidence as found, in place and not moving fire debris unnecessarily.

It is the responsibility of the Fire Department to protect the fire scene from unnecessary damage during fire fighting operations. Special care exercised during extinguishment will avoid the destruction of evidence through the misuse of fire streams. Salvage operations should be minimal until the initial fire investigation is completed, and should be confined to diminishing loss. Companies assigned to Salvage and Overhaul should incorporate scene security and evidence preservation into their plan to stop the loss.

The fire scene is the Fire Investigator's laboratory. It is searched carefully and thoroughly, photographed, diagrammed for placement of contents and evidence, and evidence is then collected and preserved.

The fire scene must be secured. Evidence cannot be used in court unless the Fire Investigator can establish a chain of custody by proving who found the evidence, where it was found and the evidence was not tampered with while in official custody. To ensure that the chain of custody remains unbroken, the scene must remain in the sole custody of the Fire Department. When at a fire scene where custody must be maintained, a guard must be posted, and custody must be maintained until the scene is released. No unauthorized persons may enter the scene. The Fire Department has the legal authority to close the scene entirely, even to the property owner or to other interested person(s). It is vital that the Fire Department prevent personnel from unnecessarily walking through a fire area, walking on, obscuring evidence, or picking up and moving evidence. This includes both Fire Department personnel and the media. If it is essential that evidence be moved or if necessary fire fighting operations may damage evidence, the evidence must be covered or its location marked before moving it carefully to a secure location.

All fire apparatus carry the yellow "FIRE LINE - DO NOT CROSS" tape, available to officers to aid in securing the scene.

Fire companies shall direct all fire investigation communication through the RFD Fire Investigator, including during multi-agency response / investigation e.g., RPD.

All Fire Investigations shall follow the Fire Investigation Procedures (402.08).

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