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FIRE DEPARTMENT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
MAY 9, 2024

THE FIRE MAY BE OUT BUT THE WORK IS NOT DONE

Looking for a cause: Fire Investigators use many tools to find why the fire started

MUSCATINE, Iowa – The debris may still be smoldering and a few hot spots have yet to extinguish, but the Muscatine Fire Department (MFD) Fire Investigation Team is already at work seeking answers as to why this fire started and how it spread.

“There are any number of reasons a fire occurs and it is our job to solve the puzzle as to what happened and how,” Mike Hartman, MFD Assistant Fire Chief and Fire Marshal, said. “We have at least two members of the team on each shift, a fire investigation trailer, and several other tools that we can call upon in our search for answers.”





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Fire investigators must carefully go over fire scenes to determine the cause of a fire. They collect evidence, study fire damage, and conduct interviews with any witnesses.

During an investigation, the MFD can call for assistance, if needed, from detectives from the Muscatine Police Department, the State Fire Marshal office, and insurance companies along with having any collected evidence reviewed at the Iowa State Crime Lab.

“Our job is to go in and investigate,” Travis Edwards, one of the lead investigators and a MFD firefighter, said.

The MFD responded to 692 fire calls in 2023, which is down from 816 in 2022. The top five responses in 2023 were structure fires (44), cooking fires (12), vehicle fires (12), vegetation fires (9), and trash fires (5).

“Insurance investigators work on their own and that work is parallel to our own investigation,” Edwards said. “They have additional labs that we do not have access to and a history with the property. We share information and that helps us piece together a hypothesis of the fires origin.”

Fire investigators normally look into what is defined as “incendiary” fires or a fire intentionally ignited under circumstances where the person knows the fire should not be ignited according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA 921: Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations). Arson is defined as the crime of maliciously and intentionally, or recklessly, starting a fire or causing an explosion. Not all incendiary fires are arson but an arson fire is more likely than not to be an incendiary fire.

While the number of incendiary fires is not great (an average of eight per year), they are a concern because of the danger to the firefighters and to the public.



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Fire and smoke damage from these types of fires has an annual average loss of \$60,000 over the last three years and while they are mostly residential fires, there also have been car fires.

"We typically do not start our investigations thinking that the fire was intentionally set," Hartman said. "We let the evidence lead us. It takes time to investigate and not every event has an answer."

MFD investigators have several tools at their disposal to help in their investigation of the origin of a fire. Most of these additional tools are housed in an investigation trailer that can be pulled to the site. One has to be brought to the site, however, and his name is Waylon.

"He is an accelerant sniffing dog that has helped in numerous investigations," Edwards said.

Investigators will come up with a hypothesis for how the fire started and begin taking samples to send to the state lab. As an expert in spotting accelerants, Waylon is brought to narrow down an area to take samples from.

"After we collect a series of samples, we can line them up and Waylon can tell us if we have good samples or need to go back to a certain spot for better samples," Edwards said.

"While we cannot use the dogs in a criminal proceeding, we can take advantage of his abilities and collect the best samples possible to be tested," Hartman said.

Investigating fires is not all that a fire inspector does. They also examine and inspect buildings to make sure all local, state, and federal codes are met, and to determine if any fire hazards exist.