

Arson and Fire Prevention

NEIGHBORHOOD STRATEGIES



Department of Fire Services

P.O. Box 1025 – State Road Stow, MA 01775

1-877-9NO-FIRE (1-877-966-3473)

www.mass.gov/dfs

ARSON AND FIRE PREVENTION: NEIGHBORHOOD STRATEGIES

A neighborhood organizes an arson and fire watch when there has been arson or fire, or there is fear of arson or fire, in the area. The watch can be organized in several different ways depending on the people involved and the size of the problem. The watch may just mean that neighbors have educated themselves about arson and fire prevention. The watch may mean that tenants do housing research on their building or that neighbors get together to rid their block of flammable trash and debris. If there has been an arson or fire in the neighborhood, the watch may become more active with window watches, phone trees and citizen patrols.

Whatever the level of activity, the concept behind neighborhood arson and fire prevention is the same as the one behind neighborhood crime prevention. Neighbors must know each other, be willing to communicate, and be willing to help each other.

SINGLE HOME EDUCATION

Statistics show that a family will have a fire serious enough to call the fire department at least once a generation. So, even if there have not been fires in the neighborhood, families should learn about fire safety.

Every household should:

- **Have smoke detectors.** Test them. Keep their batteries in place. It is your landlord's responsibility to provide them, but get them yourself if he hasn't.
- **Plan two escape routes in case of a fire.** Draw diagrams. Make sure your routes can actually be used. Choose a meeting place outside the house, such as a mailbox or a tree. At the meeting place, you will be able to see that all your family members got out of the house safely.
- **Sleep with the doors closed.** If you suspect there is a fire in your home, feel the door. Don't go out if it's warm. Use your



alternate escape route or wait by the window for the fire department.

- **Know how to crawl away from a fire.** When exiting, stay low because smoke rises. Smoke can weaken your ability to respond in an emergency or suffocate you.
- **Know how to stop, drop, and roll if your clothing catches fire.** Do not run. Smother the flames with a roll on the ground.
- **Educate your children.** They are likely to hide in a closet or under a bed during a fire if they haven't been told what to do.
- **Have fire drills and practice these techniques.** You will stay calm and be more able to protect yourself in a fire if you have practiced your escape routes and your crawling in drills.

Everyone in the house should avoid fire hazards, but know how to respond should a fire occur. Some fire hazards are:

- **Children playing with matches.** Don't leave matches or lighters out, particularly near unattended children. Teach them that matches are tools for grown-ups and that they should bring the matches and lighters they find to a grown-up.
- **Smoking in bed or on couches.** Don't smoke when you are sleepy, drinking heavily or on medication. Watch others who are smoking and see that there is nothing smoldering in the ashtray before you go to bed. Use large ashtrays. Consider banning smoking inside the home.
- **Space heaters.** Don't leave them unattended. Keep them at least three feet away from drapes, comforters and newspapers.
- **Coal or wood-burning stoves.** Make sure they are approved heaters. If you buy one second hand, make sure there are no cracks. A building permit and inspection are required to see it is properly installed. Remember that smoke leaking from the heater can kill. Sparks or the stove itself can burn you. Use only fuel that was meant for the stove.



- **Kerosene Space Heaters.** Portable, unvented kerosene space heaters are deadly. They are also illegal for use in your home. They use up all the good air, cause contact burns on children and cause serious fires. Even though you may see them being sold in a neighborhood store, they are not allowed for use in your home by state law.
- **Cooking.** Don't let oil or grease on the stove overheat. If grease catches fire, don't pick it up or pour water over it. This will only splatter the flames. Instead, turn off the heat and cover the pan. This will smother the flames.
- **Worn extension cords and overloaded electrical outlets.** Only plug one cord into each outlet. Don't use old or worn extension cords or run cords under the rug.
- **Gasoline.** Never clean with gasoline. Don't use it or store it in closed spaces, like a garage or trunk of a car. Remember not to smoke around gas. The fumes can burn or explode.
- **Candles.** Limit your use of candles, When you do use them, burn them in safety containers that will prevent them from toppling over, Extinguish them before you leave the room or go to bed.
- **Hot liquids.** Hot water isn't a fire hazard, but it can burn you. Be aware of this in the kitchen and the bathroom. Children shouldn't be allowed to fill their own bathtub water or be left alone in the tub. Hot coffee and hot tea can also cause severe burns.

NEIGHBORHOOD STRATEGIES

The first step is making each home fire safe. The next step is making the entire neighborhood fire-safe because a fire that strikes another home affects you. Fire drives property values down and property taxes up. And one fire, if it is an arson fire, may signal the beginning of an arson wave in your section of town. Fire is always a neighborhood concern, but it is an even greater concern on streets with triple-deckers or with the houses close together.



There are several ways neighbors can work together to prevent arson and accidental fire in their neighborhoods. First, neighbors must know each other and be willing to look out for each other. When they know each other, neighbors are more likely to come to each other's aid. This could be as easy as pointing out a fire hazard in his home. It could be as sensible as calling the fire department when his house is on fire.



Neighborhood watchfulness is especially important in preventing arson. When neighbors know each other, they are familiar with each other's routines. This makes them able to spot strangers or suspicious activity on the block. For instance, they would be able to tell whether a van parked in front of someone's house was an ordinary occurrence or an unusual one that should be watched and reported to the police.

When neighbors decide to have an arson watch, they educate themselves about different types of arson (arson for profit, arson for revenge, arson as vandalism). They know the signals that may precede arson and they watch for them in the neighborhood. Some of these are:

ARSON FOR PROFIT

- a building with a fire history, perhaps a series of small fires or one on the top floor;
- poor maintenance of the building;
- health and housing code violations in the building;
- creeping "gentrification";
- rising or falling property values in the area;
- frequent sale of the building;
- eviction notices to tenants or efforts to drive tenants away;
- a sudden moving out of the superintendent or some tenants;

- removal of stock or valuables by the landlord;
- an abandoned building;
- a partially unoccupied building;
- a landlord with a fire history;
- a landlord in debt, perhaps with property taxes owed to the city;
- an absentee landlord;

ARSON FOR REVENGE

- disputes between landlords and tenants;
- disputes between neighbors, family members or others;
- racial tensions;
- gang fights;
- people using the threat of arson;

ARSON AS VANDALISM

- teenagers hanging around a particular site;
- children playing with fire;
- children developing a fascination with fire;
- the presence of other types of vandalism, such as destroyed property or graffiti;
- a history of fire in a building, perhaps trash fires or other “manageable fires”.

United, neighbors have a better chance of keeping an arsonist from targeting their block.

HOUSING RESEARCH

Renters should know who owns their building and their building’s history. You have a right to ask your landlord for this information. The Boston Arson Prevention Commission will be able to assist you with housing research. All tenants should know.

- **Who the current owner of their building is.** Who has owned it over the last ten years?
- **Who currently holds the mortgage.** How much is it worth? How much is still unpaid? What is the mortgage history?
- **How many fires have occurred in the building over the last**

five years. How much damage was done? What was the cause of each fire?

- **Are there taxes owed on the building.** How much?
- **Has Inspectional Services conducted an inspection recently.** Were there house or health code violations? Is the landlord taking steps to correct them?
- **With whom is the building insured and for how much?** Know the company and the policy number.

You can divide up the research questions. Compile the information at a neighborhood meeting. Decide if it would be beneficial to the landlord if the building burned. Even if it doesn't seem likely, it will be helpful to know the building's history. If you determine that there is an incentive to burn the building, ask the landlord what he plans to do about the code violations. Demand a date that they be corrected. City agencies may demand this of him too. Tell him you will hold him responsible for injuries or damages due to fire. Inform the fire department's arson squad and the Boston Arson Prevention Commission that you are concerned about the possibility of fire.

NEIGHBORHOOD CLEAN-UPS

A neighborhood organizes a clean-up to rid the streets, alleys and vacant lots of trash and debris, which are fire hazards. A clean-up can prevent both arson and accidental fire by removing flammable materials. A clean neighborhood sends out a message to vandals, some of whom will add to destruction, but will not initiate it on a cared for neighborhood.



Neighbors may also get together to facilitate the sealing up of an abandoned building on a block. Vacant buildings are the primary targets of professional arsonists. By law, it is the landlord's responsibility to seal up his building. The City of Boston will do it if the landlord is absentee.

Neighbors should see that the roof, doors and windows are sealed. Nails and padlocks will hinder arsonists from gaining access into the building.

Clean-ups don't have to be in the literal sense. Neighbors can decide what they can do to make the neighborhood safer. Should the landlord or the city provide more lighting? Arsonists, like all criminals, prefer dark. Neighbors can use their imaginations to make their streets less vulnerable to accidental fire, arson and crime in general.

WINDOW WATCHES

Being part of a window watch means that you are committed to being aware of what happens on your street. You may look out your window a few times a day or sit on your porch and watch what goes on around you. If there has been arson in your neighborhood, find out when it occurred because arsonists sometimes work in patterns. Were they always on Thursday nights? Saturday nights? Decide when it would be most effective to take extra notice of your surroundings and decide what needs watching. Be willing to call the fire department or the police. If you are outside during your watch, greet people so that your neighbors, as well as people who don't belong on your street, feel the presence of people.



For example:

Mrs. Gilbert is a retired woman. She takes a few minutes in the afternoon to look out her window after school has been let out. Each time she looks out the window, she takes special note of an abandoned building across the street. Mrs. Gilbert's watch goes on without event until one day she notices some boys entering an abandoned building. Although it has been sealed up by the neighbors, the boys are getting into the basement. Mrs. Gilbert calls the police, then continues to watch to see

if the boys leave. If they do leave she is ready to get descriptions of them and take note of what direction they go in. The police come and find the boys in the building. They have matches, rags and gasoline, as well as some lumber from the vacant lot next to the building. Mrs. Gilbert has headed off their experiment with fire.

PHONE TREES

The phone tree is a fast method of communication. It is easy to set up. Neighbors simply exchange phone numbers and plan a calling pattern to be used when the tree is activated. Crime prevention groups use phone trees to disseminate information and call neighbors together rapidly when there is a crime in progress. Phone trees can also be utilized by neighbors experiencing frequent fires.

PHONE TREES ARE BENEFICIAL BECAUSE:

1. They improve communication and can be a systematic way to disseminate news about arson and fire. If you get a call telling you about an accidental fire, you can check your home for the same fault. For example, someone may tell you that IO Raymond had a fire involving an accumulation of flammable liquids. You would then check your home, 85 Raymond, for this hazard. Similarly, if you hear that a house nearby was struck by an arsonist, you will be able to take extra notice of your surroundings and put your arson watch on alert.
2. It can be used to call people together rapidly at the onset of a fire. Neighbors can be on hand to aid the victims. Most obviously, the phone tree can be used to ensure that the fire department is called.
3. It can also get people together when someone thinks there is an arsonist or another criminal in the neighborhood. When the phone tree is activated, more people can observe the activity and get descriptions. The information the group collects may help the police or the arson squad make an arrest. By the same token, if the criminal finds he's being watched by the neighborhood, he will have to reconsider his plans.



PATROLS

Some neighborhoods have citizen patrols. Neighbors walk in small groups with the goals of reporting unusual activity and deterring crime by providing the presence of people on the street. The patrol notes conditions that leave an opportunity for a criminal. For instance, they notice open windows or overgrown bushes which could be used as hiding places.



If a neighborhood has a citizen patrol, it may watch for arsonists or fire hazards as an additional activity. They may include potential arson targets, such as an abandoned building or a house that has received threat, as part of their regular route. Since arsonists, like other criminals, prefer deserted streets, just the presence of people will help deter them.

FINAL NOTE

Each arson and fire watch will choose its own level of activity, depending on the people involved and the size of the problem. Remember that a neighborhood will grow more fire-safe just through raised awareness of fire issues.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Communities have several arson and fire prevention resources to help neighborhoods and individual families prevent fire. The local fire department, building department and police department neighborhood crime watch liaison are good places to start.

Arson Watch Hotline:

1-800-682-9229

Department of Fire Services Commonwealth of Massachusetts

P. O. Box 1025, State Road
Stow, MA 01775
978-567-3100

Family and Community Health Massachusetts Department of Public Health

250 Washington Street, 5th FL
Boston, MA 02108
617-624-6060

Massachusetts Property Insurance Underwriting Association

Arson Watch Reward Program
2 Center Plaza
Boston, MA 02108
617-723-3800

*Originally produced by
the Justice Resource Institute Crime Prevention Network Neighborhood with a
federal Community Volunteer Fire Prevention Program grant.*

REVISED APRIL 2010