



For Immediate Release

Date: May 6, 2024

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Arson Awareness Week: Protecting Houses of Worship Against Arson

Each year from 2020 to 2022, an estimated average of 1,300 fires in places of worship were reported to fire departments in the U.S.

Springfield, Ill- The Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal (OSFM) is raising awareness about the seriousness of the crime of arson during Arson Awareness Week (May 5-11). This year's theme is Protecting Houses of Worship Against Arson.

According to the United States Fire Administration (USFA), Each year from 2020 to 2022, an estimated average of 1,300 fires in places of worship were reported to fire departments in the U.S. These fires resulted in an estimated annual average of \$74.6 million in property loss. The leading cause of fires in places of worship was cooking (33%), but intentional actions accounted for an additional 15%.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports municipal fire departments in the United States responded to an estimated annual average of 52,260 intentionally set structure fires in the five-year period from 2014 to 2018. These fires caused an estimated 400 civilian deaths, 950 civilian injuries, and \$815 million in direct property damage each year. Three in five intentional structure fires occurred in residential properties and most of these fires involved homes. More than half of intentional structure fires were ignited by either a lighter or match.

"I encourage all congregations in houses of worship to host a fire safety day. Groups can go over fire extinguisher use, candle use in services and candle alternatives, such as flameless candles. Work with your local fire department to help design a fire escape plan and inspection of your building to ensure everyone will be safe in the event of an emergency," **said Illinois State Fire Marshal James A. Rivera**. "Host a cleanup day with tasks that include trimming trees and shrubbery, cleaning windows, and removing all possible items that can start a fire, like flammable liquids, things that can burn and trash. Contact your local police department to help identify any security weaknesses, which can help prevent break-ins or intentionally set fires."

OSFM's Division of Arson currently is comprised of a Division Director, two Area Commanders, and 17 Special Agents in the field. The office staff also includes two Administrative Assistants. The OSFM has nine Accelerant Detection Canines who work with Special Agents across the state. In 2023, OSFM Special Agents responded to 1134 investigations and canine teams assisted in 263 investigations. In 2023, the OSFM's Arson Division closed 44 cases related to arson with an arrest.

A statewide Arson Hotline, **(800) 252-2947**, has been established so that citizens may anonymously provide information about a suspicious fire that has occurred or may occur.

Arson fires are preventable through education and awareness such as the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program. To request help from this program you can call 1-844-689-7882 or visit the OSFM website at www.sfm.illinois.gov.

These tips listed below can help reduce the risk of arson:

- Keep leaves, firewood, overgrown brush, and shrubbery and other combustibles away from buildings.
- Keep doors and windows locked when a building is unoccupied. Board up abandoned buildings. Do not use double cylinder deadbolt locks without keeping a key nearby, bars without quick release mechanisms, or other security provisions that could trap a person in a building with a deadly fire.
- Store all flammable liquids such as paints, gasoline, and mowers in an approved storage location: locked cabinets, locked storage units, and locked garages (prevent access to kids). Also, keep away from heat sources such as furnaces and any type of heaters.
- Report suspicious activity near houses or other buildings to the local police and support Neighborhood Watch programs.
- If you suspect a child is setting fires, notify the proper authorities. Keep matches and lighters out of reach and out of sight of young children.
- If you know or suspect that an arson crime has been committed, contact your local fire or police department.

For more information about arson prevention and the OSFM Arson Division, visit www.sfm.illinois.gov.