

FIREHOUSE[®]

Weekly Drill

DRILL #109: SECURING UTILITIES

Introduction

From the smallest to the largest incidents, one area of fireground safety that the incident commander needs to be thinking about is that of securing the utilities to ensure the safety of the firefighters. For the most part, this will encompass the electrical service, the natural gas service and, in some instances, the water service.

Controlling the utilities becomes more important at structure fires and should be one of the first tasks assigned. Depending on the location of the fire, the utility hardware (piping and wiring) can become damaged; creating an additional hazard for those operating at the incident. For instance, an engine company advancing on the fire might not see exposed electrical wires hanging down from the ceiling and quickly be in danger of having a member or members electrocuted.

Should a natural gas line have received any significant damage, allowing the gas to leak in the area of the fire, it can have a blowtorch effect. Additionally, if the fire has been knocked down, and excessive amounts of gas were to fill the air, it can ignite violently once it reaches an ignition source (smoldering embers).

It becomes essential that the utilities be shut down as soon as possible to avoid any further and unnecessary injuries to our firefighters. By allowing the utilities to remain active, they can further contribute to the spread of fire to other areas of the structure.

If your department doesn't have an SOP established for controlling the utilities, it would be a good time to start gathering information that would satisfy your department's needs, as every fire department will have a different means for addressing this issue. A great place to get started is with your local utility company, in many areas they offer safety classes dealing with the hazards associated with natural gas and electricity.

Water lines are not as much a hazard to the firefighters as are the previously mentioned electric and gas, but it also presents a problem. With the use of plastic piping in construction today, these lines soon melt. In older construction, copper lines can have the solder weaken, letting the pipes come apart, allow water to flow from them causing additional water damage to the structure. If your fire department operates in an area of the country that experiences severe winter weather, then you know what can happen to these pipes. Freezing water lines become an issue once the power and heat has been turned off to the structure. This can only be corrected by turning off the water and draining the lines.

Fire incidents are dangerous enough; why compound the problems for our firefighters by leaving the utilities turned on? Safety should be our top priority at all incidents.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick

