

Forced Entry Procedures

BACKGROUND

The fire department is a combination organization with eight personnel on duty at a time; two are assigned to EMS coverage and six are assigned to fire coverage. There is no chief officer on shift. There is a career lieutenant; otherwise senior fire personnel or volunteer officers will take command.

INCIDENT

On January 25, the fire department was dispatched to an automatic fire alarm at a residential structure. The department had responded to alarms at this address several times over the past few years, all which turned out to be alarm malfunctions. On the January 25, the fire department responded with an engine company, truck company, ambulance, and two additional personnel responding in a utility vehicle. The police department, who were first on scene, noted nothing visible from the exterior, there were no occupants present, and the structure was locked with no access. The police cleared the scene when fire apparatus arrived and took over command. The engine arrived first and the senior member established command and reiterated that there was nothing visible from the structure, side "A- alpha," of a one-story ranch structure, alarms were sounding.

A walk-around of the structure revealed no visible smoke condition or odor of burning product. The two-person crew advised command of their findings and related that they were unable to see inside the structure because all the blinds were closed on the windows and doors. Upon arrival of the truck company, the command requested that the crew force entry and check on the situation within the structure. The crew obliged and forced open the front double-french door entryway, which caused significant damage to both the doors and their frame work. Once inside the residence, personnel reported that there was no fire or smoke in the structure and that it appeared to be a malfunctioning alarm. Once the all clear was given, the alarm was deactivated and, before leaving the residence, the fire department attempted to re-secure the damaged french doors with nails and boards.

On January 27th, upon returning home from their vacation and seeing their home, the homeowners called the police to report a burglary. The police responded to the home where the homeowners showed them the damaged door and reported that there were multiple items missing from their residence. As part of their investigation the police department checked and verified that fire department responded to an alarm at the residence two days earlier and forced entry. The police department concluded that at some point between the forced entry, and the homeowners returning, the residence was entered by unknown person(s) and burglarized.

DAMAGES

- The cost to replace and repair the front door and frame was **\$10,000**.
- Due to the damage to the front door and the fact it was not fully secured in a way to protect against the weather, snow or rain damaged the hardwood floor of the entryway and an oriental rug and nearby furniture, resulting in **\$22,000** in damages.
- The reported cost of items stolen from the residence was **\$25,000**.
- Total cost of this claim was **\$57,000**.

LIABILITY

The fire department was found to be 100% liable for the losses of this claim. They forced entry on the residence, causing damage to the door, which also resulted in the damage to property from the snow/rain. Additionally, due to the extensive damage to the front door, the alarm system could not be reactivated by the monitoring company. Lastly, the burglary that took place was a result of the fire department leaving the house unsecured.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The fire department should establish a policy clearly defining when and when NOT to force entry to any structure. The policy should include a statement that an executive officer of the department is requested to respond to, or at least be notified, of the actions that have occurred. Local law enforcement should also be notified to assist and witness entry, eliminating any possible concerns and establishing a chain of custody for the structure.

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2. Careful consideration to “on-air” communications regarding the status of the structure (“vacant, unoccupied”) to help prevent tipping off potential burglars.
3. Entry techniques should be regularly practiced to help eliminate or minimize the damage when a forced entry is required.
4. Tactical considerations should be evaluated to help limit the damage if a non-emergency entry is needed. The path of entry should be one least noticeable by the public and with the least damage.
5. Proper securing of the structure upon departure of all agencies shall be required.
6. Follow-up process put in place to ensure that the structure remains secure until confirmation by the owners is received.

Questions on this topic? Ask your Supervisor or contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant at (203) 946-3700.