

ARSON-FOR-PROFIT: ITS IMPACT ON STATES AND LOCALITIES

HEARINGS  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS  
FIRST SESSION

DECEMBER 14 AND 15, 1977

Printed for the use of the Committee on Governmental Affairs



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## COMBATING ARSON IN SEATTLE

Presented by  
 RANDY REVELLE  
 SEATTLE CITY COUNCILMAN

to the

1977 Congress of Cities  
 Special Workshop on Arson

San Francisco, California

December 5, 1977

INTRODUCTION

During the past year, arson has been described in headlines as "America's Fastest Growing Crime," and "America's Most Malignant Crime." Last August, the National League of Cities' magazine, Nation's Cities, described the arson problem with the headline, "Our Cities Are Still Burning." When we examine arson's shocking statistics, we are forced to agree with these headlines.

The National Fire Protection Association estimates that property losses due to arson totalled \$634 million in 1975, an 829 percent increase over the previous ten years. The insurance industry estimates that arson accounts for 40 percent of all property losses, that arson losses are increasing 12 percent annually, and that arson losses in 1977 may reach \$4 billion.

As a quick way to realize huge monetary gains at the citizen's expense, arson has become a serious threat to our society. It is not just insurance companies that are being victimized. Arson burns hotly in each of our pocketbooks. Arson costs the community in lost buildings, lost goods and services, lost jobs, lost revenues, and sometimes lost lives.

The property losses suffered by arson victims are staggering -- far exceeding those of any other crime. In 1975, for example, the loss per robbery incident in the United States was \$331, for burglary \$422, and for motor vehicle theft, \$1,457. The average loss per arson incident was \$4,399!

Arson has been described as a cancer infecting all of American society. Like cancer, arson is a complicated problem which does not respond to a single "cure." In the City of Seattle, through hard work and cooperation, we have developed and implemented a number of "cures" to help combat arson.

SEATTLE'S ARSON PROGRAMS

In many respects, Seattle is no different from other metropolitan communities. With a population of about 503,000, the problems we face are similar to those facing other American cities. This was also true of the arson problem -- that is, until mid-1975, when the Mayor's Task Force on Arson was formed to attack the arson problem in Seattle.

In 1971, Seattle's arson losses totalled \$621 thousand. In 1972, they jumped to \$1.2 million, to \$2.2 million in 1973, and to \$3.2 million in 1974. By March of 1975, fire officials were estimating that arson losses in 1975 would increase to \$4.4 million. The expected increase never occurred. Instead, Seattle's arson losses declined to \$2.6 million in 1975 and dropped to \$1.9 million last year. We are now estimating a 1977 loss of \$1.7 million, which is equivalent to the 1972 losses when the effects of inflation are considered.

The Mayor's Task Force on Arson, created in June, 1975, included responsible representatives of nine agencies working together to reduce the dollar loss and incidence of arson in Seattle. These nine agencies included the Seattle

Fire and Police Departments, the Seattle Mayor's Office, the Seattle City Council, the King County Prosecutor's Office and Department of Public Safety, the King County Fire Chiefs, the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, and the Washington Insurance Council.

While some people felt the Arson Task Force would be just another typical task force -- holding a few meetings and then slowly fading into oblivion -- we proved them wrong. Through weekly Task Force meetings held during a number of months, we developed and implemented a variety of arson control programs that have produced astounding results in Seattle.

The Arson Task Force members quickly concluded that arson was a serious and growing crime in the Seattle area, resulting in significant economic and personal losses. We found that arson is one of the most difficult crimes to prevent, detect, investigate, and prosecute successfully. We agreed that the most urgent step needed to control arson was for top level officials of the police and fire services -- along with other officials in local, state, and national governments who are responsible for public safety -- to give greater attention and resources to solving the growing arson problem.

As a result of the Arson Task Force's deliberations and recommendations to the Mayor, a number of programs were quickly implemented to combat arson. The Seattle Fire Department's Arson Investigation Unit was placed under the direct supervision of the Fire Chief, thus enabling the Chief to establish better operational control over the Unit. This action gave the arson investigators greater visibility and emphasized the City's commitment to controlling arson.

Initial steps were taken toward establishing an arson analysis program in the Fire Department. This program is designed to provide better and more usable data on when and where arson incidents are likely to occur, thereby enabling the Fire Chief to better allocate the Fire Department's resources for combating arson. A mapping program was also established which graphically displays all arson incidents by type and location.

Based on the initial results of the arson analysis program, the Fire Department formed arson reduction and prevention patrols -- called "Community Fire Alert Patrols." These patrols send combat fire fighters and equipment to identified problem areas during the night hours.

Members of the patrols are not intended to function as police officers. They patrol in a predetermined area in a highly-visible, plainly identified vehicle. When patrol members detect suspicious activity, they call a police unit for help. The patrols are also effective in deterring arson by simply "showing the flag."

The Seattle Fire Department has documented specific instances where problems created by economic conditions, social changes, and in one case, a shortage of gasoline, created a likely potential for arson incidents. Apparently as a result of using the arson patrols at night to augment daytime fire prevention inspections, the potential arson incidents never occurred.

In selected "high risk" neighborhoods, the efforts of the arson patrols have been aided by using combat fire fighters to distribute "Community Assistance Bulletins," which inform local residents how they can help control the arson problem in their neighborhood.

One of the major issues facing the Arson Task Force was how to allocate the responsibility for investigating arson fires. As stated in a report prepared by the Stanford Research Institute:

"Arson control unfortunately suffers from two handicaps. Arson is an inherently difficult crime to detect and prosecute, and it falls into a governmental gap between police and fire department responsibilities that is too often not effectively covered.

\* \* \*

"Neither fire departments nor police departments are inclined to focus their full attention on incendiary fires, even though both claim a legitimate concern for the subject.

\* \* \*

"Fire experts believe that detection and prosecution of arsonists, as well as investigation of fires, is properly the function of the fire department. . . . \* \* \* Police authorities maintain . . . that 'the fire service role is one of fire investigation and arson detection, and not that of arson investigation . . . ! \* \* \* These contradictory attitudes and capabilities create situations in which efficient and consistent arson enforcement is quite difficult."

Based on the recommendations of the Arson Task Force, the Mayor decided that the operational command of -- and the direct responsibility for -- arson investigations should remain with the Fire Chief. Since the Fire Chief is responsible for preventing and controlling fire losses, the Task Force concluded

he should have the authority and resources to meet those responsibilities. Moreover, a fire chief will naturally place a higher priority on controlling arson than would a police chief, who is responsible for preventing and controlling a wide variety of other serious crimes.

While considering the issue of allocating responsibility for arson investigations, the Arson Task Force also recommended transferring two Seattle police detectives to the Fire Department's Arson Investigation Unit. The detectives would serve under the operational command of the Fire Chief, while remaining under the administrative control of the Police Chief for such matters as pay, promotion, and discipline.

Two skilled investigators were selected from a number of police detectives who volunteered to serve in the Arson Investigation Unit. Both men have been of great assistance to the Unit in conducting detailed arson investigations and in preparing cases for trial. They have also unlocked many Police Department doors which were previously closed or unknown to Fire Department personnel.

The Arson Task Force recommended using the police detectives in the Arson Investigation Unit only until the regular arson investigators' skills could be improved to the level of a well-trained police detective. To speed the acquisition of these skills, the Task Force developed and implemented a three-phase training program for arson investigators.

Phase I, an arson investigator's basic training course, was 166 hours in length. The course was taught by Police Academy personnel. The course was essentially identical to the 11-week basic law enforcement course, eliminating only those classes deemed unnecessary for arson investigation.

At the end of Phase I, the trainees immediately entered Phase II, a 40-hour crime scene investigation course. This was again identical to a Police Academy course, known as the "detective school."

Phase III was an advanced arson investigation course lasting 80 hours. The course began with a series of lectures by knowledgeable experts in arson-related fields and concluded with in-depth, on-the-scene investigations of accidental and arson fires.

The intensive 286-hour program, training 14 Seattle arson investigators and 14 fire fighters from outside Seattle, was completed at a cost of only \$10,700. The results of the program are impressive -- a highly trained, highly motivated group of fire fighters prepared to investigate all aspects of arson fires.

The Arson Task Force also undertook a broad-based study of the arson problem and the environment in which it occurs. Although a large amount of raw data on arson had been available in Seattle, no comprehensive, systematic effort had been made to determine when and where arson fires occur, by whom and for what reasons they are set, or what types of structures/businesses are the most common targets of arson. Moreover, little was known about the local criminal justice system's response to arson and the arsonist.

Based on the Arson Task Force's recommendation, the Seattle City Council authorized the Fire Chief to contract with the Institute for Puget Sound Needs, a public non-profit agency of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, to conduct the arson analysis. The City appropriated \$7,500 to provide half the funding, and the Safeco Insurance Company generously donated the other half.

The arson analysis, entitled "Arson In A Socio-Economic Framework," reviewed 11 years of arson statistics in Seattle. Based on a computer analysis of the data, the study provided a wide range of valuable information about arson in Seattle -- information which is now being used by the Seattle Fire Department to prevent, detect, and investigate arson incidents.

For example, the Arson Task Force initially speculated that the frequency of arson incidents would be negatively correlated with economic trends. In other words, worsening business conditions and a decreasing standard of living were expected to provide the motives for -- and therefore an increase in -- arson incidents. This expectation was not supported by the arson analysis. Many indicators of an improving economy -- increases in employment, retail sales, per capita income, and business starts -- showed highly positive statistical relationships with arson. As the Seattle economy improved, arson incidents and losses increased.

The work of the Arson Task Force has been aided greatly by the efforts of the insurance industry in Seattle. Along with their active support of the Task Force, insurance companies are refusing to pay large-loss fire claims when it

appears the policy holder may have been responsible for the fire. I believe this approach has a definite impact on other policy owners who may be similarly inclined.

The local insurance companies have also established a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of an arsonist; funded a statewide, toll-free "arson hot line" for collecting, organizing, and disseminating information on suspected arsonists; and appointed one person in each major insurance company to act as a contact for all arson incidents. The companies have also conducted seminars on arson for their own employees, using much of the Arson Task Force's material. At one such meeting, the International Association of Arson Investigators presented the Task Force with an award "for outstanding accomplishment by implementing and achieving a progressive, innovative and successful program to reduce arson." This was the first such award ever presented by the Association.

Increasing public awareness and understanding of arson has been an integral part of the work of the Arson Task Force. Last year, a statewide arson alarm program was publicized by a series of radio and television spots -- produced at cost by a Seattle advertising agency. This publicity campaign announced the formation of the statewide, toll-free arson hot line and the insurance industry's reward program. Last summer, to promote arson awareness among juveniles, the Seattle Fire Department created the "arson rat" -- and promoted a contest to name him. Over 5,000 entries were received, and "Sinder Sid" posters and

T-shirts are now being sold all over Seattle. In addition, a four-week television series produced by a Seattle station won a local award for investigative reporting; the morning newspaper ran a week-long series on arson; and articles on Seattle's arson program have appeared in publications all over the country.

An integral part of halting the nationwide spread of arson is to recognize and treat it as a serious crime. As noted in the 1976 publication of Arson: America's Malignant Crime:

"If we continue to do nothing in terms of a collective and unified approach to this problem, the incidence of arson will increase to a degree that eventually solutions will be next to impossible. Nobody is really unconcerned about arson -- they all agree that it is a problem that needs work. They just believe that somebody else is working on it."

An unfulfilled recommendation of the Arson Task Force is that arson be officially reclassified as a Part I crime. The Uniform Crime Reporting System classifies seven crimes as Part I offenses -- criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft. Because arson is now classified only as a Part II crime, arson incidents are not reported with the thoroughness or publicity of other crime reports.

Reclassifying arson as a Part I crime would provide a number of benefits, including:

- (1) Better reporting of arson cases by law enforcement authorities, possibly leading to an enormous increase in the reported incidence of arson;



- (2) Increased awareness of the arson problem by public officials, insurance companies, and the general public;
- (3) Recognition of arson as a serious law enforcement problem, leading to improved access to funding for arson research, development, technology, and control programs;
- (4) Increased motivation for the development of training programs for combating arson;
- (5) Incentives to develop and adopt better arson laws and to involve prosecutors and judges in the fight against arson; and
- (6) Greater attention by the insurance industry to preventing arson fraud.

The Public Safety Steering Committee has recommended that the National League of Cities endorse the reclassification of arson as a Part I crime. I strongly urge your support of this recommendation.

Up to now I have discussed the highlights of the successful programs developed and implemented by the Mayor's Task Force on Arson since June of 1975. Now I would like to comment on the men who are critical to the success of many of our programs -- the arson investigators.

Known as "Marshal 5," the Arson Investigation Unit is comprised of eight fire fighters, two officers, and two police detectives -- all well-trained and highly motivated arson investigators. They investigate all suspicious fires resulting in over \$1,000 in losses. They are very aggressive and dedicated, working as long as 20 hours at a time on a fast-breaking case. They prepare their own cases and present them to the Prosecuting Attorney, and they are all regarded as "expert" witnesses.

Seattle's arson investigators are becoming celebrities in the community. Numerous newspaper and magazine articles have described them as "the best in the nation." While that statement may have something of a home-town ring, their results are hard to beat.

I previously described how Seattle's arson losses have declined from an anticipated \$4.4 million in 1975 to an estimated \$1.7 million this year, but what about the remaining statistics -- the number of arson incidents, arrests, and convictions?

Comparing 1974 (the year preceding formation of the Arson Task Force) with 1976, Seattle experienced a 14 percent reduction in arson incidents and a 174 percent increase in arrests of suspected arsonists. In 1974, we recorded 662 arson incidents, with only 73 arrests. In 1976, there were 571 recorded arson incidents, with 200 arrests. Of the 200 arrests, 179 resulted in convictions -- an 89.5 percent success rate. Most of the convicted adult arsonists are now serving time in jail.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the essential ingredients of a successful program for combating arson. Based on Seattle's experience since the Mayor's Task Force on Arson was established in June, 1975, I believe a program which will effectively reduce arson requires the following ingredients:

- (1) Close, continuous cooperation and coordination among appropriate public and private agencies, including the Fire Department, the Police Department and other agencies of the criminal justice system, local elected officials, and the business community, especially the insurance industry.
- (2) Accurate, useful information on the nature of the local arson problem, including data on when and where arson incidents occur, who is most likely to commit arson, why arson is committed, the types of businesses and structures that are the most frequent targets of arson, and the local criminal justice system's response to arson and the arsonist.
- (3) An adequately-funded, well-trained, and highly-motivated arson investigation unit which effectively investigates arson incidents, prepares cases for trial, and promotes a close working relationship among the fire department, the police department, and the local prosecutor's office.

- (4) The aggressive involvement of combat fire fighters in a variety of programs designed to help arson investigators prevent, detect, and investigate arson incidents.
- (5) The active participation of private business -- especially the insurance industry -- in the local government's efforts to combat arson.
- (6) An effective, on-going publicity campaign which highlights the work of the agencies combating arson, educates the general public about the arson problem, and promotes citizen participation in the fight against arson.

Thank you for the opportunity to describe Seattle's novel and successful arson programs. I hope Seattle's experience will assist you in combating arson in your own cities.

**END**