Arson: A Growing Problem

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: Amy Grant
ARSON: A GROWING PROBLEM

ABSTRACT

America is facing an above average amount of home foreclosures, unfortunately abandoned, foreclosed on, and empty homes cause serious problems within a community. In Canton, Ohio the town is beginning to have an issue with an arsonist who is terrorizing the community and causing thousands of dollars in damage to the vacant homes and buildings that are being targeted. Canton is 20.6 square miles with a foreclosure listing of 201 houses at the current time. The opportunity is there and the arsonist is taking advantage of it.

In the following paper I will explore the background of arson in the Canton area and nationally, as well as foreclosure rates for the state of Ohio. I will also reference what the community as a whole can do to be diligent in keeping their neighborhoods clean in order to deter arsonists. I have researched several areas of the country that have successfully implemented arson prevention programs that I feel that Canton can borrow from to help educate the community. The programs researched would best be implemented by the fire and police departments. I believe these programs would have a positive influence on the community.
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INTRODUCTION

America is facing a high rate of home foreclosures. Foreclosures mean empty property and empty property invites criminal activity. While the foreclosure rates continue to rise so do the cases of arson, whether it is a crime of opportunity or a case of insurance fraud.

In Columbus, Ohio Assistant Fire Chief of the Columbus Division of Fire, Karry Ellis, says there were 5,300 vacant residential buildings throughout Columbus as of July 2009 with three quarters of them having had at least one fire. These arson fires are a danger to firefighters as well as the community. So how do we deal with the risk of arson and unnecessary death?

BACKGROUND

Data compiled by NFPA’s Fire Analysis and Research Division reports that 46% of vacant home fires during the 2003-2006 periods were intentionally set. Karry Ellis says the arson rate in Columbus for vacant home fires is easily at 90%. Captain Al Bragg of the Akron Fire Department says that as the weather gets colder the department sees an increase in vacant home fires because the homeless will break in to seek shelter. The homeless will sometimes start fires to keep warm and the fires will burn out of control, sometimes they don’t mean to start fires at all but end up burning the place down. However there are cases such as in Canton, Ohio where there is simply an arsonist on the loose in town causing devastation in his wake.

Canton is currently experiencing what may very well be a serial arsonist. In the area they have had 18 suspicious fires since May 2010. In one suspicious fire two firefighters were

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1 Fear, Forclosure, Frustration, Fire
2 Fear, Forclosure, Frustration, Fire
3 Akron Vacant House Fires Sparked By The Homeless
injured, one was released and went back to battle the fire that injured him. Several were vacant homes and buildings, but two were occupied homes, luckily everyone was able to get out without injuries. The fire department believes the occupied structures may have been mistaken for vacant structures because of the appearance of the homes. The fire department has offered a $5,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction of the arsonist. Captain Lorenzo Bagley of the Canton Fire Department said the city’s population has declined and foreclosures have become commonplace. Residents complain that at vacant houses the grass goes uncut, the shrubs grow out of control, hookers, drug dealers and neighborhood kids are using the houses.\(^4\) It won’t be long before one of the homes set ablaze has people inside that are unaware and lose their lives.

Empty buildings and vacant houses are only inviting arson problems. RealtyTrac reports that 2,163,780 homes have been filed as foreclosures in the nation as of Sept. 2010, 13,094 of those foreclosures are in Ohio.\(^5\) The USFA’s National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) data and the NFPA report an estimated 316,600 intentional fires are reported each year injuring 7,825 firefighters and civilians, and causing an estimated $1.1 billion in direct property loss annually.\(^6\)

Foreclosure is a common reason for empty and abandoned houses. The foreclosure process in Ohio can take as many as a couple years to complete a foreclosure, with 150-180 of

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\(^4\) House fires plague Canton; authorities seek arsonist
\(^5\) RealtyTrac Trend Center
\(^6\) Arson Awareness Week
those days just waiting to get to court.⁷ In the mean time several of those houses sit vacant inviting danger.

In Columbus, Ohio, David Sawyer, a Lieutenant in Columbus’s Division of Fire and a community relations officer with the Fire Prevention Bureau, runs outreach efforts throughout a number of statewide and community organizations. Sawyer represents Franklin County’s “Save Our Homes Task Force” which helps provide mediation, legal aid, and consumer education to homeowners facing foreclosure. Sawyer is trying to build relationships with communities by attending meetings in neighborhoods around the city. Sawyer promotes the city’s “Home Again” program which was established to help combat vacant homes in the city through enforcement, prevention, acquisition, rehabilitation, and demolition. The goal for the program is to put 1,000 vacant homes back into productive use by the year 2012.⁸

While demolition of the run down, vulnerable homes is a good idea it is also a costly decision. The average demolition cost is $10,000 and in towns struggling for funding this may not be a feasible option.⁹ Demolition also takes time. Chief Moore of the Glendale Fire Department, Glendale, Ohio, said it takes him a month to prepare the demolition of a structure. The department has to get permits, inspections, zoning clearance, and this is only after going to court and proving that the structure is a nuisance and must be demolished.

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⁷ Ohio Foreclosure Laws

⁸ Fear, Foreclosure, Frustration, Fire

⁹ Vacant buildings feeding spread of arson
RECOMMENDATIONS

During the week of May 2-8, 2010 the USFA promoted Arson Awareness Week and the theme this year was Community Arson Prevention. The goal of the AAW was to raise attention on the crime of arson, and to provide communities with tools and strategies to help them recognize and combat arson. The USFA recommends that communities start Neighborhood Watch Programs within their respective towns and once established to partner with law enforcement, insurance providers, businesses, churches, and other local community groups. The key to a successful neighborhood watch program is recognizing and reporting unusual and suspicious activity. A successful Community Watch Program can bring neighborhoods, fire service, and law enforcement together to reduce the crime of arson.

Canton Fire Department needs to look at the reasons that arson is becoming a problem in their area. There is no hard and fast rule for committing arson, but here are some reasons for arson:

1. It’s a target of opportunity

Canton can help to control the arson if it is a crime of opportunity by either renovating or demolishing the structures. As mentioned earlier, demolition takes time and money to get done. Canton’s budget for demolition is higher this year than usual. They were the recipients of a $1 million injection of federal funds through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program. They were also given $400,000 in funding from the city’s Community Development Block Grant funding.

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10 Community Arson Prevention
which is a federal program through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. As of July 2010 Canton has successfully demolished 91 buildings, that’s around 3 structures a month. The city says the demolitions are complaint driven and they are trying very hard to get the city cleaned up. The city and the fire department need to work closely together to get a plan of action to tear down the structures that are possible targets of arson, based on statistics and location, and get those taken care of first, rather than them being based on complaints.

2. It’s being burned for insurance purposes

There is not a way to predict insurance fraud, but there are ways to prevent future scams. When it is ruled arson the fire department needs to aggressively prosecute, to set an example and let others know that arson and insurance fraud are crimes, no matter the reason, and they will be caught.

3. It’s a firefighter, want to be firefighter, or someone that just likes to watch fire and enjoys the destruction they have caused

In rare cases a firefighter will commit the crime of arson just for the thrill of being able to go put it out, or because they feel they don’t get to go on enough calls. Still other arsonists set fire to property out of a sick compulsion. They are addicted to the thrill of power that comes with burning down someone else's property. Again, these people are hard to predict but will eventually be caught.

For Canton to catch the person, or persons, committing the act of arson they need to pay close attention to the crowd, take pictures, interview, watch as people come and go. Talk with

11 House fires plague Canton; authorities seek arsonist
the initial companies to see if they noticed anything on the way in, many arson cases have been solved by those companies noticing details. Also interview everyone from the 911 caller to the neighbors on the street.

There are those in neighborhoods that may not want to become involved, perhaps for fear of retaliation, or just because they don’t want to be bothered by all that goes along with testifying in the court case that follows. The use of an incentive program may entice those who witness criminal activity to step forward and tell authorities what they have seen. In Michigan during Arson Awareness Week the Michigan Arson Prevention Committee will conduct public awareness campaigns through television ads, newspapers, radio, and the distribution of information packets to police and fire agencies. In Massachusetts the Massachusetts Department of Fire Services sponsors an Arson Watch Reward Poster Contest, which reaches out to middle school students throughout Massachusetts. The winning posters are placed on calendars and circulated throughout Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Recently Coatesville, Pennsylvania was plagued by nearly 70 cases of arson from February 2008 through March 2009. The fires caused more than $3 million in damage, left more than 100 people homeless, and injured seven firefighters. The fires prompted the development of the Chester County Arson Task Force who started to offer rewards up to $20,000 for information leading to arrest and conviction or suspects. Coatesville officials gathered local volunteers to develop a neighborhood watch program. The program distributed 800 motion activated lights, smoke alarms and batteries to residents. The Task Force and Neighborhood Watch instructed residents to remove trash and
debris from their yards, remove combustible materials, secure chemicals, and keep property well lit.\footnote{Community Arson Prevention}

**CONCLUSION**

Unfortunately because of the economic downturn the problem of foreclosure and abandoned houses will continue. Fortunately there are programs out there that have been successful in educating communities to be aware of their surroundings and catching and prosecuting arsonists. Arson destroys communities by causing fear and bringing down property value. Cities where arson is a problem need to take the time to re-instill faith in the town and let residents know they are working hard to catch the person causing fear and chaos. Any type of interaction with the community by fire or police agencies, through community meetings, media outlets, etc., will let the residents know that you are working toward a solution to the problem, and the residents will be grateful and proud of their neighborhoods.
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