



Incident # 070011184;

House Fire With Five Victims Trapped/Rescued

9819 Connecticut Avenue; Box 5-08

1310 hours on Saturday, February 3rd, 2007

Written by Assistant Chief Rusty Rothenhoefer; Chief 200A

Introduction

At approximately 1310 hours on Saturday, February 3rd, 2007 the PSCC received a call for a house fire with people trapped at 9819 Connecticut Avenue in station 5's area. That request for assistance ultimately brought a box alarm with an additional medic unit, a rapid intervention dispatch, an EMS Task Force, and a Fire Task Force to the scene to control the fire and treat and transport the five victims who were rescued from the structure. The day was a clear, cold day with temperatures above freezing. There was no snow or ice present.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View of Sides A & B. The window on the upper floor
Of Side B is where four rescues were made.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View of Side A Quadrant D, where the fire originated



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View of Side C Quadrant C of the structure



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View of the corner of Sides B and C

The Call to 911

A call to 911 was made by 12-year old Alicia Spry, the oldest of 5 children who were inside the home when the fire started. Spry informed the call taker, Captain Bill Richards, that she and her four siblings were upstairs in a bedroom on the second floor. Spry stated that the fire was downstairs and blocked their means of escape. The audio tape of the 911 call reveals smoke detectors sounding in the background. PSCC provided a pre-alert to the personnel at Station 5 via telephone and quickly dispatched the appropriate units.

Captain Richards remained on the line with the caller to provide support and maintain up to date information on the occupants and their locations. He prompted her to gather everyone together, keep the door closed and sealed, stay low to the floor and open the window to the bedroom to alert the responding units to their location. Captain Richards' assistance to the victims by gathering information and providing direction to the caller was invaluable. His work provided Spry and her siblings with every possible advantage for survival. Captain Richards also provided responders with detailed information which minimized search time for the entry crew and contributed directly to the location and rescue of all of the occupants alive.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
The bedroom where the 5 children were trapped.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
Inside view of the window where four of the victims were Removed.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View of the area of fire origin – first floor Quadrant D



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View of the area of fire origin – first floor Quadrant C.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
View up the stairs toward the second floor landing.



Photo courtesy of Fire and Explosives Investigations
Soot from smoke accumulation on the second floor

The Response

PSCC dispatched Box 5-8 as follows:

Engines 52, 71, 501, 191, 211

AT51, AT19, RS29

A59, M10

Kensington and Wheaton Duty Officers - Chief 5 and Rescue Chief 2-2 responded

Battalion Chiefs 4 and 2

In addition to the above, the following responded

Chief 200, Chief 201, Rescue Chief 2, Battalion Chief 1, EMS2, Safety 1

Rapid Intervention Dispatch

AT18, RS18, M239

Task Force

E181, E541, T6

EMS Task Force

M13, A519, A238, M309, M39

Chief 5 – Command

Chief 5 arrived on the scene simultaneously with Engine 52 and A59. Chief 5 established command and gave a detailed on-scene report describing the location of the fire. He requested a task force and requested the Medic Unit from the initial box alarm to report to the side A/B corner to assist with 2 victims who were being brought down from a second floor window via the roof and ladder. Chief 5 and A59 were confronted with a frantic mother concerned for her children. Based on the events unfolding, Chief 200 requested PSCC to dispatch an EMS Task Force as he was approaching the scene.

Efforts of the Initial Arriving Crews

Engine 52 gave water supply instructions en route. Once on scene, Engine 52 gave an initial on scene report of smoke showing and people trapped. Engine 52's officer split his crew of 5 personnel into two teams. The first team extended an 1 ¾" attack line to confine the fire and to protect the stairs and search crew. Engine 52's second team, in heavy smoke, searched the upper floors of the structure where they had been told the victims were located. Engine 52's driver threw ladders to the roof and assisted from the exterior with the removal of two victims, a 7 year old male and a 3 year old female at the second floor bedroom window on side B. Engine 71's and Rescue Squad 29's crews arrived shortly after Engine 52. Engine 71's officer split his 4 person crew with one crew advancing a second handline to assist with fire confinement and the other crew assisting with removing the victims previously mentioned from the bedroom window with Engine 52's driver. Afterward, Engine 71's second crew assisted with the search for the remaining victims. Rescue Squad 29's crew entered the bedroom via the window on side B to also assist with the search for victims. The crew attempted to use a thermal imaging camera to assist with their search efforts, but the smoke was too thick to see the screen on the TIC. A third victim, a 12 year old female was located and removed through the window by one of Rescue Squad 29's crew. Rescue Squad 29's crew took out the second window in the bedroom and conditions began to improve. This allowed the fourth and fifth victims, thirteen month twins to be located in the closet area. One of the twins was removed by Engine 71's officer by way of the bedroom window. Engine 52's officer brought the second twin down the interior stairs of the structure through heavy smoke. Rescue Chief 2-2 arrived and was assigned Division 1 supervisor. Battalion Chief 4 arrived and was assigned as Division 2 supervisor by command. Division supervisors assured that primary, secondary, and tertiary searches were performed on both floors and the basement, the fire was extinguished, and utilities were controlled.

Chief 200 assumes Command from Chief 5

Chief 200 and Chief 201 arrived at the same time and assembled in Chief 200's buggy on side alpha. By this time the first victims were being brought out of the structure. Chief 200 assumed command of the incident from Chief 5. Command assigned EMS2 as the EMS Group Supervisor. Command moved all EMS Operations onto 7 Delta under the direction of Chief 201. This enabled the Chief 200 and Chief 201, functioning as a command team to better manage the priorities of this complex incident. Operations on 7 Charlie were focused on search and control of the fire and associated issues while operations on 7 Delta were focused on victim accountability, hospital routing, and the appropriate direction of EMS resources to the victims. In this case, co-location of the two command officers was critical to facilitate the face to face communications required to assure victims were accounted for as the crews inside the structure performed primary and secondary searches and their information was coordinated with witness and PSCC information about who was in the house at the time of the fire. Once command was confident that all victims had been accounted for, efforts were directed to hospital routing and notification on the EMS side and fire control efforts on the fire suppression side. Command declared the incident to be under control approximately 24 minutes after dispatch.

EMS Operations

Ambulance 59 and Medic 10 were dispatched on the initial alarm. Medic 239 was dispatched with the RID dispatch. An EMS Task Force was requested soon after the first units arrived on scene. The first two children rescued were a 7 year old male and a 3 year old female. Both were priority 3 patients with smoke inhalation and were moved to Ambulance 59 and transported to Holy Cross Hospital along with their mother.

EMS2 arrived on scene as the first two victims were being moved to Ambulance 59. Thinking he might be the first on-scene ALS provider, he checked on the condition of these two patients and then reported to the Command Post. Command assigned EMS2 as EMS Group Supervisor and moved all EMS operations onto Seven Delta at this time. Command worked with the EMS Group to assign victims to arriving EMS units, route EMS units to appropriate hospitals, and make hospital notifications.

The crews of M10 and M239 arrived and were presented with the remaining victims, three unconscious, priority one pediatric patients. These crews handled these critical patients under difficult and emotional circumstances. They did an excellent job with rapid assessment, transport and treatment en route to Children's Hospital. The aggressive airway maintenance and oxygen therapy for these patients was a life-saving intervention in these cases and was directly responsible for the complete recovery of these patients.

The need for EMS resources on this incident outpaced their arrival. Fortunately the condition of the first two patients was such that both could be handled by one unit. Medic 10 had a crew of four and was able handle two of the remaining three patients. Medic 239 arrived quickly on the Rapid Intervention Dispatch and was redirected to meet the needs of the EMS Group. The fact that Medic 10 had a crew of four, which was supplemented by a crew member from Rescue Squad 19, made their ability to transport two priority one victims possible. Otherwise, the transport of one of the victims might have been delayed until the arrival on the next ALS unit, Medic 13. Had the conditions of the patients required CPR, additional assistance from responding fire units would have been necessary.

Post Incident Activities

Due to the intensity of this incident all first alarm units as well as all units involved in victim treatment and transport participated in a hot wash of the incident prior to returning to service. Each unit and command officer described their units' efforts and explained what went well or what could have gone better. No major problems were identified in this hot wash. While all units were still assembled for the hot wash, the Investigations group collected statements from unit officers and division supervisors. CISM was on scene to debrief all participants in the incident.

Analysis

Initial arriving units were faced with a complex incident with two immediate priorities. First, five victims needed to be located and removed from harm. Secondly, the progress of the fire needed to be controlled (or stopped) to protect the search and rescue operation. The officer on Engine 52 made excellent use of his 5 person crew to address both incident priorities. Engine 71's officer split his crew of 4 to put a second line on the fire and assist with search and rescue. Rescue Squad 29's crew assisted with rescue, search, and ventilation making the location of the last two victims possible. Desired staffing on the first two engines arriving on the scene was critical to the successful outcome of this incident. Chief 5's actions to assume command, direct resources, and call for additional assistance early were critical to the quick control of the incident.

By the time Chief 200 assumed command, the incident had grown to the point where activities were beyond the span of control of a single fireground commander and the amount of mission-critical messages beyond the capacity of one talkgroup. Fortunately, Chief 201 arrived at the command post at this point in time. The strategic incident priorities were divided between the co-commanders and units were moved to radio channels according to their function. This allowed each commander to focus on their part of the incident. The formation of a command team kept incident span of control manageable and allowed incident commanders to better focus on their portion of the incident priorities.

The outcome of this incident was very successful because of many factors. Call takers and dispatchers at PSCC gathered key information to assist responders in locating the victims. Ms. Spry was exceptionally brave, nevertheless, the call taker's instructions were vital to keeping her calm and ensuring the survival of all five victims. The leadership of the initial arriving unit and command officers resulted in a sound initial tactical plan, quick location and rescue of the victims, and control of the fire. The rapid, aggressive treatment and transport of victims to the appropriate medical facilities resulted in all patients surviving and improving in condition to date.

Fire Cause

As a post script, the fire originated in a closet off of the first floor master bedroom. To date, the cause of the fire is undetermined and still under investigation by personnel from the Fire and Explosives Investigator's Office.