



Utica National Insurance Risk Management Department Bulletin

Preventing Arson at Religious Institutions: guidelines to minimize risk

SCOPE: This Risk Management Alert is designed to increase awareness of the problem of arson as a cause of fires at religious institutions.

BACKGROUND: Information from the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) was used in the development of this Risk Management Alert.

A report published by the USFA notes that in 2010:

- There were 1.6 million fire calls within the United States.
- Approximately 8,500 intentionally set fires occurred within non-residential structures.
- Financial losses associated with non-residential intentional fires totaled approximately \$370 million. The USFA adds that intentionally set fires are the *second leading cause* of non-residential structure fires, and are the *leading cause* of both fatal fires and dollar loss in non-residential structures.
- Religious Institutions are often an easy target for arsonists because many institutions are located in isolated areas and are empty much of the time; and many are constructed of wood and furnished with wooden pews.
- Motives to set arson fires include: spite or revenge, fraud, vandalism, murder, concealment of a crime, and/or racial hatred.

Tips on Preventing Arson at Religious Institutions

- **Illuminate building exterior and entrances.** Use motion-activated lighting near doors and windows. Good illumination will help deter arson and other crimes such as vandalism.
- **Proper landscaping can help create a crime-free environment.** Keep shrubbery and trees trimmed so the building can be observed by passing patrols or neighbors, etc.
- **Use adequate locks and security devices on all doors and windows** and keep buildings locked when not occupied. Remember that emergency exits must remain operable from inside.
- **Communicate with law enforcement and fire officials about concerns** regarding arson and other crimes. Invite the fire department to tour your buildings and conduct pre-fire planning.
- **Appoint a responsible person from the religious institution to work as a liaison with these authorities.**
- **Promote a neighborhood arson and crime watch** to report suspicious activity and encourage neighbors to be alert to the presence of strangers in the area of your buildings. Suspicious persons or activities should be reported promptly to the police.
- **Keep religious institution leaders and members informed of concerns** as well as fire- and crime-prevention activities.

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- **Keep boxes, trash, wood and other combustibles away from the building.**
- **Install a burglar and fire alarm/detection system with central station monitoring** to protect all parts of the religious institution's facilities, and have it tested and maintained annually according to national standards.
- **Supervision of outside groups that use your facilities and possess a set of keys to your facilities should be a priority for each religious institution's leadership team.**
 - On-site supervision of outside groups will help ensure all coffee pots and other electrical appliances are turned off, and all doors and windows are secured after any outside group(s) uses your facilities.
 - Providing keys for your facilities to "trusted/long-term" outside groups is a practice that should be avoided.
 - Responsibility for unlocking and securing your facilities should remain with religious institution leadership and designated staff.

For more information on how you can help prevent fires, please contact your local fire department on a non-emergency number, or the United States Fire Administration at **(800) 238-3358** or www.usfa.fema.gov.

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