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Red Flag or Natural Occurrence

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In its chapter 19, NFPA 921 offers an extensive list of indicators of incendiary fires, along with a caution that the existence of a single indicator or a combination of indicators is not conclusive proof of an arson fire. Many of the indicators found during an investigation can be the result of something other than an intentionally set fire, and only a thorough investigation can identify what actually happened.

Multiple fires

The first indicator given in chapter 19 is multiple fires. The finding of multiple, unconnected fires is often the basis of a finding of arson, but a variety of circumstances can produce apparent multiple points of origin. The natural convection currents from a fire in a room take the hot gases to the ceiling, where they spread horizontally to the walls and start banking downward. The tops of window coverings are usually within inches of the ceiling and are easily ignited. The burning at the top causes them to become detached from their hangers and they fall to the floor and continue to burn. Since this takes place early in the fire, the patterns they produce often look like points of origin. A careful examination of the remains of the window coverings may show whether they burned from the bottom up or the top down. Similarly, macrame or wicker plant hangers ignite early and drop to the floor. A look at the ceiling above a suspected point of origin may find a hook used to suspend a plant hanger.

Flying brands from lightweight combustibles can also give the appearance of multiple sets. If the original fire involves paper, light cloth items, or other similar materials, convection currents can send flaming brands throughout a room or compartment. Overloaded electrical wiring can heat up along its length, but may only cause ignition where the wiring comes in contact with combustibles that are more easily ignited. If these are far enough apart, it may appear there were unconnected points of origin.

Chapter 19 lists several other situations that can produce the appearance of multiple fires. If examination of the scene finds there are what appear to be more than one point of origin, each must be scrutinized to determine what happened there. If there are truly multiple points of origin, that is a strong indication of an incendiary act.

There are numerous other indicators or "red flags." Even though several may be present in a loss, each has to be evaluated independently as part of the investigation. The determination that a fire is arson just because red flags are present is an invitation to a bad faith claim. Arson is not determined by red flags but by finding the origin and cause and eliminating accidental causes.

PHOENIX INVESTIGATIONS, INC. AND PHOENIX LABORATORY AND ENGINEERING SERVICES

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