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Arson Suspected In Recent Beckley Fires

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West Virginia - Beckley firefighters suspect a recent string of fires in the city to be arson, officials said Tuesday. Beckley Fire Department crews responded to three separate house fires over a one-week period, with two of the fires called in hours apart, Capt. Ed Willis said.

On Aug. 24, crews were called out around 3:21 a.m. to fight a fire on a vacant house, located at 400 Hill St., according to Raleigh County Emergency Operations Center records.

When firefighters arrived, the house was "fully involved." Crews extinguished the flames and left the scene around 3:40 p.m.

According to Raleigh County Assessor's Office records, 400 Hill St. is owned by PBH Properties LLC.

Willis said the owner had recently added a new water tank and was doing work on water lines inside the house prior to the fire.

On Friday at 9:40 p.m., firefighters were alerted that a vacant house located at 309 Hull St. was on fire.

According to records, the property is owned by Clarence Owens.

"When they pulled up, the fire was already coming through the roof," Willis said.

Firefighters tried to enter the house to fight the fire from the interior, but conditions were so bad that they were forced back outside to launch a defensive attack against the flames, Willis reported.

Firefighters issued a "second alarm" -- a call to firefighters from another shift -- to get help in extinguishing the fire.

"When we have a structure fire like that, we're using a lot of our resources, and we like to have somebody and put them on another truck, ready to respond to another fire," Willis reported.

Second alarm crews had relieved the first responders when a fire was reported at 401 Hill St. around 1:35 a.m. Saturday, Willis said.

"By the time the second call came in, we probably only had maybe four or five people on Hull Street, and most of the guys had went back to their stations to get their equipment in order," said Willis.

He explained that after any firefighting event, crews immediately return to their stations to prepare their hoses, trucks and other equipment for any future call.

"They had already done that, so they were ready to respond when the second call came in," he said.

When firefighters arrived at 401 Hill, they discovered a vacant structure "around 50 percent involved," Willis stated.

"They knew it was vacant, because we were up there the week before," he said. "After they got (the fire) knocked down, they went inside and made sure everything was out."

Crews left the scene at 4:20 a.m.

According to assessor's records, 401 Hill St. is not listed as an address with an owner.

Firefighters cleared the Hull Street fire at 7:42 a.m. Saturday.

Willis said all three fires were so involved that investigators weren't able to safely enter in order to fully investigate.

He added that arson is suspected in all three fires.

"It's very likely the two (fires) on Hill Street were set by the same person," said Willis.

He added that it's possible the same person set all three fires.

Wills explained that some fires are set by people who enter vacant structures to live or to stay warm.

Others are set purposefully.

"Some people just like to set fires," said Wills, who has been a firefighter for 32 years. "We've had people do that just for the thrill; they just like to do that kind of thing.

"They will light the fire and sit back and watch it burn, watch us come do our job."

Wills said neighbors who notice strange cars or people around the neighborhood where fires have been set should report the activity to police.

"The men that respond to the (fire) are risking their lives," said the captain.

"They're going into the structure to make sure it's vacant, and you have live power lines going into the house.

"A lot of firefighters die each year fighting vacant structure fires," he said.

Written by Register-Herald

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