

Snapshot Size-Up #107



Vacant Building Markings

A recent firefighter fatality report recommended that Fire Departments should consider developing and implementing a system for identifying and marking unoccupied, vacant or abandoned structures to improve firefighter safety. The recommendation came after a firefighter who had been working the interior of an abandoned structure fire was caught in a flashover and died several days later as a result of his injuries.

Unexpected structural hazards may be present at abandoned buildings if owners or salvage workers remove parts of the building such as doors, railings, windows, electrical wiring and piping. To avoid unnecessary injuries to firefighters, marking systems painted on or affixed to the entrance doorways could warn them of potential dangers. The report recommended that the marking system should consist of a 12-square-inch warning placard made of reflective material that glows in the dark and is set up similar to the example below:

An Empty Box – Normal stability at the time of the marking.

A Box with an “\” inside – Interior hazards exist to such a degree that interior operations may be conducted only after examination and with extreme caution.

A Box with an “X” inside – Every effort must be made to conduct operations from the exterior. When absolutely necessary to enter the building, adhere to the following:

1. Approval by officer in command is required.
2. Examination must be conducted before a unit is committed.
3. Number of personnel and interior operational time should be kept to a minimum.



Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso is a twenty-year veteran of the fire service. He is a regular contributor to Fire Engineering Magazine & FireOpsOnline.com. He is also co-author of the book Fireground Operational Guides (PennWell 2011). The book features universal tactical worksheets and operational guides for more than 70 incidents that range from water, gas and electrical emergencies to multiple-alarm structure fires.