

FIREHOUSE[®]

Weekly Drill

DRILL #112: SEARCH & RESCUE

Introduction

We read articles all the time about firefighters getting injured and sometimes killed while performing search and rescue operations. Quite often a search team will enter the structure without a hoseline to protect themselves, making a dangerous job even more risky. That stated, all firefighters, who are going to be assigned duties for search and rescue must be trained and prepared to perform these tasks.

Search and rescue must be conducted quickly, as every second counts. This, however, does not mean we put safety on a backburner. Life safety is always the first priority at a fire incident and the firefighter's safety is just as important as those we are trying to save. This is why we have to have a coordinated plan. To accomplish this we need to make sure that all other actions being conducted are in support of the search and rescue team; after which time this function is completed then all efforts can be geared to fire suppression.

Just about everything we do on the fireground has at some point been sized up; search and rescue is no different. A size up should be conducted to include: the time of day; the type of occupancy and the number of occupants; location of occupants; degree of risk being posed to the occupants; and finally, their ability to self evacuate with little to no assistance from the firefighters. One method used to assist us is that of comparing the risk vs. gains. At some incidents, search and rescue operations might be limited or, for that matter, unobtainable based on the conditions confronting us. When fire is coming out of every window in the structure there is little chance for anyone to survive; this includes firefighters. Don't become a sacrificial lamb!

When there are known occupants in need of rescue, firefighters should first remove those occupants at greatest risk and in immediate danger. However, at times we do not always know the whereabouts of the occupants. In these cases, search and rescue should begin in areas where the occupants are most likely to be; during the middle of the night it would most likely be the bedroom areas.

Additionally, search priorities can be established to assist the firefighters. The average single-family dwelling finds the search team going through it relatively quickly.



However, an apartment building is going to need to have some search priorities. The first priority is that of searching the area immediately around the fire area. Once this has been accomplished, then the rest of the fire floor should be searched.

The next priority is to begin searches directly above the fire and on that floor. Because heat and the deadly smoke gases rise, firefighters should then head to the top floor and begin searching each floor back down to the one just above the fire. After this, all other remote areas within the building should be searched.

Keep in mind that we always perform a primary search and a secondary search. The primary search is done quickly and should cover any areas that victims might be located. After the fire is brought under control, a more systematic search is conducted, known as the secondary search. These secondary search firefighters will take the time to look in all possible areas that a victim might be. Sometimes children will hide in some of the most obscure areas. I remember one fire where we found two young children between the wall and a refrigerator in the kitchen.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick