

CITY OF BUFFALO

Firefighters battling 'booby traps,' too

Commissioner notes disturbing trend

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As Buffalo's arson problem spreads into neighborhoods that are not typically targeted by firebugs, officials are seeing another alarming trend. Firefighters have encountered a growing number of "booby traps" inside burning buildings this summer, Fire Commissioner Michael S. Lombardo disclosed Wednesday. He said there have been numerous instances where containers filled with gasoline and other flammable liquids were placed in structures in apparent attempts to thwart crews from dousing the blazes.

"It's very reminiscent of the '70s and early '80s when there would be booby traps for firefighters," Lombardo said. "It's an extremely disturbing trend."

Five firefighters suffered minor injuries earlier this month battling a blaze on Virginia Street in a vacant building that contained cans of gasoline. The fire quickly spread to an adjacent duplex, but none of the occupants was injured.

There have been 419 arsons in Buffalo this year, including more than 150 since June 1. While Lombardo said the figures are comparable to last year's rate, officials are concerned that the problem is migrating into neighborhoods that rarely experienced arsons in prior years.

CitiStat, Buffalo's accountability panel, reviewed a map Wednesday showing that arsons have occurred in every Council district since January. In the past, most arsons were confined to neighborhoods in the vicinity of Fillmore and Bailey avenues and Genesee and Sycamore streets.

New steps have been taken to address the arson problem, officials said Wednesday. They include intensified efforts to board up abandoned buildings.

Timothy E. Wanamaker, the city's strategic planning director, said making it harder for firebugs to get inside buildings could help. He also red-flagged delays in demolishing some vacant buildings.

First Deputy Mayor Steven M. Casey was quick to blame some of the delays on a policy that forces the city to get approval from the control board before demolitions can occur. Control board officials repeatedly have said they make efforts to fast-track such requests.

Meanwhile, Lombardo cited an improvement in demolition activity, noting it took an average of 16.8 days to tear down buildings in which fires occurred this year.

Mayor Byron W. Brown encouraged fire officials to prepare a list of equipment and technology they think they need to be more proactive in dealing with arsons.

"We'll work with you in trying to provide some of these resources to make it harder on people who commit arson in the City of Buffalo," Brown said.