

# Abandoned, Hazardous or Fire-Damaged Buildings

## Background

Abandoned and vacant buildings provide an easy target for fire setters. Don't let hazards from abandoned or vacant buildings kill or injure firefighters or civilians.

## Data

According to a [National Fire Protection Association report for 2011-2015](#) (2018 report), there were an estimated average of 30,200 structure fires in vacant buildings each year. These fires resulted in an average of:

- 60 civilian deaths
- 160 civilian injuries
- 3,310 firefighter injuries
- \$710 million in direct property damage
- 20 firefighters died in 17 fires in vacant building or buildings under demolition or renovation (2007-2016)

## Temporarily vacant buildings

- Buildings or tenant spaces that are temporarily vacant shall be safeguarded against unwanted access and maintained in a safe condition. Refer to the 2020 Minnesota State Fire Code (MSFC) Section 311 for details.
- Sprinkler, fire alarm and standpipe systems must be in an operable condition unless:
  - All combustible materials have been removed from the building and the fire official confirms that with the type of building construction, fire separation distances and security of the building, the premises does not create a fire hazard.
  - When the building is not heated, the sprinkler, standpipe and fire alarm system may be placed out of service provided the building has no contents or storage and all openings are secured to prevent trespass.
- Buildings determined to be unsafe per MSFC Section 111 shall have a placard placed on the street side front of building. The size and symbols for placards are listed in MSFC 311.5.



# Minnesota Department of Public Safety State Fire Marshal Division

## Abandoned buildings

- The suggested first step for alleviating hazards from abandoned, hazardous or fire damaged buildings is to attempt to contact the owner and/or insurance company to have the building hazards repaired or removed.
- The second step if the owner or insurance company cannot be contacted, is to consult with legal representation and have the vacant, abandoned or dangerous building secured against access by locking exterior doors, boarding windows and doors, placing “No Trespassing” signs and taking other measures if needed to prevent trespass. Board up procedures can be found in [FEMA's "After the Fire" document](#).
- If additional measures are necessary, beyond securing the building, consult the League of Minnesota Cities document, the MSFC and legal representation.

## League of Minnesota Cities guidelines

The League of Minnesota Cities provides a good document on its [website](#). Type “dangerous properties” into the search window. This provides cities, counties and townships with protocols to follow for repairing, securing or demolishing abandoned, vacant or dangerous buildings. You can also [click here](#) for dangerous properties PDF. There are also instructions for obtaining a portion of the insurance settlements from fire or explosion damage provided the city first established an escrow or trust account per [Mn. Stat. 65A.50 subd. 12 and 14](#). The city cannot obtain insurance settlement proceeds for losses that happened before the effective date of the account.

## Minnesota State Fire Code

Section 111 (unsafe buildings) of the MSFC includes requirements for dealing with buildings that have unsafe conditions:

- If a building constitutes a clear and inimical threat to human life, safety or health, orders shall be written for repair, remodeling, removing or demolishing of the building (MSFC 111.1).
- Structures that become unsafe because of inadequate means of egress or constitute a fire hazard, or are otherwise dangerous to human life or public welfare or which involve illegal or improper occupancy or inadequate maintenance shall be deemed an unsafe condition. Buildings not secured against entry are also considered unsafe (MSFC 111.1.1).
- Structural hazards shall be brought to the attention of the building code official (MSFC 111.1.2). In communities without a building code official, the city council may obtain the services of an engineer or architect to ascertain the extent of structural hazards.
- The fire department may order the immediate evacuation of a building that has hazardous conditions resulting in an imminent danger to the occupants (MSFC 111.2).
- The owner, operator, or occupant of a building or premises deemed unsafe shall abate or cause to be abated or corrected such unsafe conditions either by repair, rehabilitation, demolition or other approved corrective action (MSFC 111.4).



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## Summary

Work with the building owner to have the temporarily vacant, abandoned or unsafe buildings secured and repaired. If additional action is required, work with the city attorney and follow the League of Minnesota Cities' document on dangerous properties to have the situation resolved.

Any questions related to this should be directed to the code specialist with the SFMD at 651-201-7221 or you can e-mail questions to [fire.code@state.mn.us](mailto:fire.code@state.mn.us).

