

Why You Should Use an Accelerant Detection Canine

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I was recently asked the question, "Why should my company pay for the services of an Accelerant Detection Canine?" I had not given that question much thought in the last couple of years. I just assumed that everybody knew how valuable a tool a properly trained accelerant detection dog was to fire investigation.

But, you see I am now in a private business providing a service to customers not familiar with the value of an Accelerant Detection Canine. While a member of the Connecticut State Police, I used my dog Mattie at over two hundred fire scenes. I also trained over 60 dogs for other agencies. The majority of these dogs were sponsored by the insurance industry. In 1996, I trained my current dog, Angel. I used Angel while conducting Origin and Cause Investigations for NEMAX Claim Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of the USF&G Insurance Company. In 1997, I decided to specialize in training and handling Accelerant Detection Canines.

A properly trained Accelerant Detection Canine is a valuable tool to assist the investigator in locating evidence of an ignitable liquid.

There are other methods used by investigators to take samples. Hydrocarbon detectors, mechanical-sniffing devices, have been used for years. They are a good tool, but have drawbacks. One drawback is that they do not discriminate between normally burned items in fire scenes that are made from petroleum products and items that might contain an ignitable liquid. Today's fire scenes contain a large amount of petroleum based products. Plastics, polyurethane foam chair cushions as well as carpeting are all petroleum-based products. Properly trained Accelerant Detection Dogs are taught to ignore these normal pyrolysis products and concentrate on finding volatile liquids. It can also take a long time to search a large area of burn damage with a mechanical sniffer. What might take an hour with a hydrocarbon detection device will probably take only minutes with a good dog. Remember that you are paying an Origin and Cause Expert at an hourly rate.

Another method used to take samples involves training and experience. The investigator will take samples from areas that correspond to burn damage consistent with an accelerant pour pattern. They can be successful doing this, but not nearly as successful as using the dog.

Along with being faster, a good dog should also cut down on the number of samples taken. It costs about the same amount of money to have a single sample analyzed, as it does to have the dog work an average fire scene. Also, a big advantage of the dog, is the prescreening of samples before they are sent to a laboratory. After the dog alerts in the scene, samples are taken and placed in a line-up consisting of at least three other cans of similar fire debris. The dog is then used to search the line- up. If it alerts to the sample, we seal it and ship it to a forensic laboratory for analysis. If the dog fails to alert to the sample, we go back inside and expand our sample area. This method has greatly increased laboratory confirmation of submitted samples. So you will save money by sending in fewer samples. The samples that are submitted should have a higher percentage of success.

Another situation where the dogs are invaluable arises when there is no visible pour pattern. In some fires, the damage is so severe it obliterates burn patterns. Wouldn't it be nice to have a dog do a search of the area to eliminate the use of an ignitable liquid? What about unignited pours? Let me explain. There have been occasions,

many occasions, where I have used my dog to search rooms of a building with no visible signs of fire damage and had my dog find raw gasoline. Sometimes there just isn't enough oxygen and the fire goes out in its early stages. Other times the fire is extinguished by the Fire Department before it can communicate to the areas where the ignitable liquid was poured

In situations where expert witness testimony is conflicting, evidence of an ignitable liquid will hold great weight. Canine evidence has been well received by courts throughout the United States. On those occasions where the dog alerts and the samples come back unconfirmed, the handler may testify as to their opinion regarding the alert of the dog.

It must be remembered that utilizing an Accelerant Detection Dog Team does not replace the need for an Origin and Cause Investigator. The dog is only a tool, but experience has proven that a properly trained dog is the best tool available to find trace evidence of ignitable liquids.