*This model program is intended for general information purposes only. It should not be construed as legal advice or legal opinion regarding any specific or factual situation. Always follow your organization's policies and procedures as presented by your manager or supervisor.*

**Firefighting Operations in Vacant and Abandoned Buildings Model Policy**

**Purpose:**

Fire fighters are often killed or injured when fighting fires in abandoned and vacant structures. These structures pose additional and sometimes unique risks due to the potential for fire fighters to encounter unexpected and unsafe building conditions such as dilapidation, decay, damage from previous fires and vandals, and other factors such as uncertain occupancy status. Risk management principles must be applied at all structure fires to ensure the appropriate strategy and tactics are used based on the fireground conditions encountered.

The Vacant and Unsafe Structure Placard Program has been developed to educate the name of agency fire and rescue department personnel on the standard marking system used by the name of authority having jurisdction. This marking system alerts responding fire and rescue personnel of the potential danger and/or associated risks that might exist within a specific structure.

**Scope**:

This policy will apply to all vacant and abandoned buildings within the fire department’s jurisdiction.

It shall be policy that ALL fire department personnel be familiar with the visual appearance and meaning of the “Vacant and Unsafe Structure” placard to improve firefighter safety as well as situational awareness in assisting firefighters in tactical decision making while operating on an incident scene as well as understand the following:

* Any vacant or abandoned buildings or structures determined to be unsafe pursuant to Section 110 of the International Fire Code (note: replace this authority reference with the appropriate locally adopted code if it is difference from the IFC) relating to structural or interior hazards shall be placarded.
* *Insert local system for the marking/placarding of vacant or abandoned structures*
* The use of this symbol shall be informational only and shall not in any way limit the discretion of the on-scene incident commander.
* In the event that fire and rescue personnel respond to any structure not already placarded and question its integrity or safety, contact *WHO* as soon as possible so the appropriate actions can be taken to correct any hazards. 8.

**Definitions**:

*Abandoned Building* – a structure that has been without occupants for a period of time and has been stripped of any contents that would have a resale or scrap value, including piping, toilet and plumbing fixtures, and kitchen cabinets. They are typically empty of furnishings, and can be in varying states of decay.

*Potential Life Hazard* -

*Vacant Building* – a building between occupancies or residents. These structures are often structurally sound.

**Procedures**:

The most critical life hazard factor in an abandoned building are the lives of the attacking fire forces lives of the attacking fire forces. Before committing resources to possible life hazard scenarios, the incident commander should clearly assess the risk to firefighting personnel The only ABSOLUTE life hazard is that of the fire fighters operating at the incident. POTENTIAL life hazards may also exist.

Before initiating an interior attack in vacant or abandoned structures, Command must consider the following:

* Is the building secured or unsecured?
* Exterior conditions which indicate structural uncertainty, for example partial roof collapse / openings to the elements
* Commercial occupancy or residential
* Department preplans of the structures
* Reports from local inspectors

A well-involved vacant or abandoned building would likely represent a zero survivability profile. Such conditions in an abandoned or vacant building would also indicate little property to be saved and therefore members should avoid an offensive interior attack. **No level of risk to responders is acceptable in situations where there is no potential to save lives or vacant property**.

Personnel shall announce via radio communication the recognition of a placarded building upon arrival to an incident so Command and all units are aware of the situation. *Communication/dispatch* shall broadcast the information over the radio to all responding companies and resources that the building is placarded as a vacant and unsafe building. Prior to the initiation of an interior attack in a s vacant structure with no civilian life safety threats, personnel must psychologically adjust to a ‘NO RUSH’ approach as the greatest life hazard is fire personnel. In this instance, a slower and more cautious approach to conduct operations is appropriate,. More time than usual should be devoted to the size-up of vacant structures.

The structural stability of the vacant building or parts of buildings will be the most important aspect determining the initial suppression (interior or exterior) strategy. Vacant structures promote the rapid spread of fire, both vertically and horizontally. In addition, possible collapse and extension to exposures requires the rapid application of water to achieve timely fire control.

Operations are to be conducted in a discipline and planned manner with emphasis on the safety of operating personnel. Because vacant structures tend to have low victim potential, they should be searched within the limits of safety after building conditions and survivability profile evaluated. Consider an external visual initial search for indications of potential surviving victims.

Structures marked as unsafe may required defensive firefighting tactics and the protection of exposures only. Unmarked vacant structures shall be approached with the same degree of extreme caution as marked structures. The Incident Commander has sole responsibility for the operations and safety of all personnel.