

# Tuning up

## Training exercise in Hills lets firefighters expand their skills

By Casey Hane  
staff writer

**F**IREFIGHTERS COULD be seen through the billowing black smoke rising from the old farmhouse. All were working to douse the fires, which were intentionally set.

About 20 full- and part-time members of the Farmington Hills Fire Department participated last week in the first controlled house burn in this area since a training session took the lives of three western Oakland County firefighters Oct. 25.

Criminal charges could result if negligence is uncovered in connection with the Millford incident. Three firefighters died when trapped in a flashover fire in the upstairs of an old farmhouse in Millford Township.

On Nov. 11, a small, wood-frame house on 13 Mile, near Haggerty, was burned as part of the Farmington Hills Fire Department's regular training program. It held special interest because of the recent deaths in Millford Township.

Last week's burn was a media event, where Farmington Hills fire officials stressed the utmost in safety. Reporters, photographers and camera crews spent the morning observing and participating in some cases.

THE LEAD instructor, Lt. Thomas Shortt, spent nearly an hour briefing the crews on their locations, the house floor plan and special procedures for the training burn before the group left fire department headquarters.

Then it was on to the training site, which will soon be part of the Copper Creek residential development stretching south to 12 Mile.

Using wood and paper products, Fire Chief Richard Marinucci lit the first fire of the day as members of the news media watched. "We are conscious of all of the fuel spread," Marinucci told reporters. "This is what normally burns in a house in a fire — not kerosene or gasoline."

Millford police investigators have not confirmed or denied news re-



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ports that a mixture of gasoline, camp stove oil and kerosene were used as accelerants in the Millford Township burn, where firefighters were learning to deal with arson.

"We don't use an accelerant, so it's (the fire) predictable," explained Deputy Fire Chief Peter Baldwin. "If you throw an accelerant on it, you just don't know."

THE HOUSE that became the Hills' firefighting "classroom" was prepared several hours before training began, Marinucci added.

Four teams worked in rotation during the burn. That allowed all firefighters to experience the fire from different positions and to do the different jobs involved in fighting house fires.

As added safety measures, before the training began, an open cistern at the rear of the house was covered to keep firefighters from falling in, a door to the basement was nailed shut to keep them from heading downstairs and becoming trapped; and 13 Mile was closed to through traffic to avoid any complications from the road.

Several fires were started and extinguished during the four-hour training drill. A WDIV-TV reporter

who had donned firefighting outerwear and the appropriate ventilation equipment caught his breath before filling his report.

"This makes us realize a little more what you guys go through," said reporter Roger Weber.

NOT ONLY do firefighters learn to extinguish fires in house burning drills, but also work on ventilation skills and using tools during a fire, according to Assistant Fire Chief Rob Rebtoy.

The Hills department has four more houses, donated by area developers, to use for future training burns. Another burn is planned for December when the current class of recruits will be ready for "live" training, Rebtoy said.

As chief recruiter for the department, Rebtoy said he does not believe the Millford tragedy has reduced interest in becoming a firefighter.

The current Farmington Hills class lost several people shortly after the deaths, but Rebtoy said all were for a variety of personal reasons — and none were related to the Millford Township fire.

"We'll just pick up the number in the February class," he added.



The second story of the old farmhouse used in last week's training burn is in flames. The fire was originally set on the first/ground floor.



Lt. Thomas Shortt of the Farmington Hills Fire Department instructs participants in last week's training burn as to what would happen at the site of the old farmhouse. Personnel were assigned to groups and tasks.

AT RIGHT: Ladders were placed at the second-story windows to provide a secondary means of escape in the event of an emergency during last week's fire department training burn at an old farmhouse on 13 Mile, near Haggerty, in western Farmington Hills. The morning-long burn was the department's 30th since 1983. Such burns are designed to let firefighters sharpen their skills in actual fire situations. Houses used in such burns are donated to the city.



Staff photos  
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