

Contact

For Immediate Release

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## **Arson Hotline Beginning to Show Results**

Despite its infancy, the State Fire Marshal's arson hotline has landed several people in jail for deliberately setting fires to their cars, homes and businesses.

The arson hotline debuted May 1, 2000, and has generated valuable calls that have been turned over to state and local arson investigators.

"Many of these calls have directly resulted in arrests and saved insurance companies thousands of dollars," said State Fire Marshal G. Mike Davis. "I think Texans are going to see the arson hotline become a very valuable law enforcement tool."

Arson hotline posters are placed at the scene of suspicious fires around the state in hopes that someone will call to report any suspicious activity or possible suspects. The posters ask people with information about a suspicious fire to call the toll-free state arson hotline at 1-877-4-FIRE-45 (1-877-434-7345). The posters are printed in both English and Spanish.

Calls to the hotline have resulted in three arrests in Austin. Farmers Insurance stood to lose more than \$23,000 on a reportedly stolen vehicle until someone called the arson hotline to report the car's owner had intentionally burned the car and reported it stolen to get insurance money. The suspect is currently out on bond awaiting trial.

A husband and wife were arrested this year after they allegedly hired an arsonist to torch their West Austin business. The fire spread to adjoining businesses resulting in more than \$60,000 in fire and smoke damage. A call to the arson hotline revealed who set the fire and why.

"The people who called the arson hotline pinpointed our suspects and explained their motives," said Aaron Woolverton, Austin Fire Department fire and arson investigator.

Cash rewards were offered as an incentive for people to call the arson hotline shortly after Texas Insurance Commissioner Jose Montemayor announced the start of the program. The reward system was the brainchild of A Texas Advisory Council on Arson (ATAC), a group of fire, law enforcement and insurance investigators who advise the State Fire Marshal's Office on matters pertaining to arson investigations. Higher rewards are offered to callers who assist arson investigators on fires involving injuries or fatalities.

ATAC President John Lawson said the group has turned to insurers to increase its reward program. "One phone call can lead to an arrest, which can result in a significant savings to an insurance company," said Lawson.

Callers can remain anonymous. Each anonymous caller who provides worthwhile information is given a tracking number. The caller can stay in touch with the arson hotline to see if their information leads to an arrest, which can result in a reward.

In 2001, more than 11,700 fires were determined to be incendiary (deliberately set) or suspicious. These fires accounted for 16 percent of all reported fires, 11 percent of all fire-related injuries, 15 percent of all fire-related deaths and 22 percent (\$86,042,069) of all fire-related losses.

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The Insurance Council of Texas is a multi-purpose, non-profit trade association consisting of more than 400 property and casualty insurers writing business in Texas.