

Fire Department rolls out office van

Investigators can stay cool to finish work

By Michael Ferraresi

THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

In the past, Phoenix fire investigators would spend hours at the scene of a suspicious blaze, shifting between the remains of a charred building and the cab of a pickup truck.

This week, the Phoenix Fire Department announced its 16 investigators now have a fully loaded, 35-foot recreational vehicle from which to file search warrants, document evidence and conduct other business.

Fire officials unveiled the donated RV, worth \$120,000, this week, announcing that it could hit the streets this month.

The vehicle and equipment were donated through the coordination of the 100 Club of Arizona, a local non-profit group that raises money to support law enforcement officers and their families.

Phoenix Fire Chief Bob Khan said the recognizable vehicle, which is wrapped in an artistic tribute to Phoenix law enforcement, will simply make investigators' jobs easier.

The interior includes a flat-

screen TV, refrigerator and other amenities to keep investigators or witnesses comfortable. A computer, fax machine, phone and video camera are hooked up inside in what would be a family's vacation master bedroom.

"It's not the magnitude of the vehicle itself, it's the work that will come out of it," Khan said.

Suspicious fires are "sometimes sinister, sometimes accidental," Khan added — and there's only a limited amount of time to gather evidence. In the past, fire investigators would rely on Phoenix Police or federal agencies like the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to expedite investigations.

Temperatures can reach 1,400 degrees inside a burning building, Investigations Unit Director Jack Ballantine said, and the site remains hot afterward. The office atmosphere of the RV will give investigators the opportunity to cool off and remain mobile.

"You can only stay in that heat for so long," said Ballan-

tine, a former Phoenix homicide investigator who joined the fire department last year.

"It will gas you," he said. "It's a filthy, mucky place. This RV will give them a respite."

Phoenix City Council approved the use of the RV earlier this summer.

Fire investigations

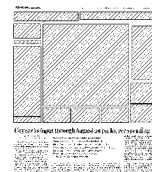
The Phoenix Fire investigations unit has responded to 508 fires this year, 137 of which were classified as arson.

In 2007, fire investigators were called to 847 fires, 286 of which were arson.

Fire officials estimated that the 16 former captains on the Phoenix Fire Investigations Unit could face 60 or 70 cases each this year as the department anticipates responding to more than 1,000 fires.

Investigations Unit Director Jack Ballantine said the team clears 36 percent of its caseload currently.

To report information on a local arson, call 602-262-7766.





MICHAEL FERRARESI/THE REPUBLIC

Phoenix Fire Department Investigations Unit Captains Sam Richardson (from left), Tim London, Fred Andes and Willie Nelson stand with Sadie, the department's arson dog, outside the new mobile van.