August 4, 2026

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE AND REVIEW

Position Statement

Proper Investigation Protocol Following a Structure Fire

Regarding: Correct investigation protocol following a structure fire in the United States, including structural, electrical, plumbing, mechanical/HVAC, fire-protection, industrial-hygiene, hazardous-particulate, documentation, evidence-preservation, remediation, and re-occupancy considerations.

1. Statement of Position

Structural Engineering and Inspections, Inc. (SEI) issues this public position statement to address the correct investigation protocol following a structure fire. A post-fire evaluation should not be treated as a simple visual walk-through, an odor determination, or a cosmetic smoke-cleaning exercise. A structure fire can affect the gravity-load system, lateral-force-resisting system, fire-resistance-rated assemblies, electrical system, plumbing and gas piping systems, mechanical/HVAC systems, fire-protection systems, building envelope, contents, and indoor environmental conditions. [NFPA 921] [IEBC]

SEI's position is that a proper fire-damage investigation should be multidisciplinary, sequenced, documented, and risk-based. The fire origin-and-cause investigation, structural safety assessment, MEP evaluations, hazardous-materials screening, industrial-hygiene assessment, remediation protocol, repair design, and final clearance process each serve a different purpose. None should be substituted for the others. A building may appear stable while concealed framing, connections, diaphragms, roof trusses, masonry walls, concrete, steel, electrical conductors, ducts, plenums, insulation, or interior cavities remain heat-damaged or contaminated.

SEI is particularly concerned with two conditions that are often underestimated after a structure fire: (1) structural damage that is concealed, progressive, or not visible from the exterior; and (2) hazardous particulates and smoke residues that can migrate well beyond the room or area of visible flame damage. Fire-generated soot, ash, char, smoke condensate, corrosive residues, metals, combustion byproducts, fire-suppression water, asbestos, lead, silica-containing dust, fiberglass/mineral fibers, and microbial amplification from wet materials can create conditions that require professional evaluation before demolition, cleaning, repair, or re-occupancy begins. [OSHA 1910.134] [EPA RRP] [EPA Asbestos]

The correct protocol begins with safety and evidence preservation, proceeds through targeted discipline-specific assessments, and ends with written findings, repair documents, remediation criteria, clearance documentation, and approvals required by the authority having jurisdiction. Local codes, adopted editions, ordinances, fire-marshal requirements, insurance requirements, and project-specific conditions control the final scope for any particular building.

2. Governing Principles

A post-fire investigation should be controlled by the following principles.

- Life safety and scene safety come first. No investigator, owner, contractor, adjuster, or occupant should enter or disturb the structure until the fire department or authority having jurisdiction releases the scene for the intended activity and a qualified person evaluates immediate structural, electrical, gas, chemical, respiratory, fall, and confined-space hazards.
- Origin-and-cause work must be coordinated with damage assessment. NFPA 921 and NFPA 1033 address fire investigation methodology and investigator qualifications. Evidence should not be destroyed by premature debris removal, demolition, cleaning, or destructive testing before the origin-and-cause investigation and evidence-preservation needs are addressed.

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- The structure should be evaluated in both temporary and final conditions. Fire damage can reduce strength, stiffness, stability, connection capacity, fire resistance, durability, and serviceability. Temporary shoring, bracing, access restrictions, or partial demolition may be required before detailed investigation can proceed.
- Hazardous particulates should be presumed until evaluated. Smoke and soot residues are not ordinary house dust. Combustion of plastics, treated wood, electrical components, insulation, coatings, furnishings, roofing, flooring, and household chemicals can deposit complex residues on surfaces, within HVAC systems, and in concealed spaces.
- Visual cleanliness is not clearance. Odor reduction, surface wiping, or encapsulation does not demonstrate that contaminants were properly characterized, removed, or controlled. Clearance should be based on the scope, target contaminants, sampling plan, visual criteria, and written professional judgment of qualified environmental professionals.
- Discipline-specific expertise is required. Structural, electrical, mechanical, plumbing, fire-protection, industrial-hygiene, restoration, and code issues should be addressed by qualified professionals working within their respective scopes of practice.

3. Standards, Codes, and Authorities to Be Considered

No single national standard governs every post-fire condition for every building in the United States. The applicable standard set depends on the jurisdiction, occupancy, construction type, building age, system type, fire severity, insurance requirements, hazardous materials, and proposed repair scope. At a minimum, the investigation team should consider the following standards, codes, and authorities, using the edition adopted by the jurisdiction or required by the project.

Fire investigation and evidence: NFPA 921; NFPA 1033; ASTM E620; ASTM E1492.

Building and existing-building code: International Building Code; International Existing Building Code; International Residential Code; NFPA 1; NFPA 101; NFPA 241.

Structural engineering: ASCE/SEI 7; ASCE/SEI 11; ACI 562; ACI 318; ACI/TMS 216.1; AISC 360; TMS 402/602; NDS for Wood Construction.

Electrical, fire alarm, and electrical safety: NFPA 70; NFPA 70B; NFPA 70E; NFPA 72.

Mechanical, HVAC, fuel gas, and plumbing: International Mechanical Code; International Plumbing Code; International Fuel Gas Code; NFPA 54; NFPA 58; NFPA 90A; NFPA 90B; NFPA 96; ASHRAE 62.1/62.2; ASHRAE 180; NADCA ACR.

Fire-protection systems: NFPA 13; NFPA 25; NFPA 72.

Worker safety, hazardous materials, and environmental health: OSHA 29 CFR 1910.134; OSHA 29 CFR 1910.1200; OSHA 29 CFR 1910.147; OSHA 29 CFR 1926.1101; OSHA 29 CFR 1926.62; OSHA 29 CFR 1926.1153; OSHA 29 CFR 1910.120; EPA RRP Program; EPA Asbestos Laws and Regulations.

Restoration and post-loss cleaning: ANSI/IICRC S700; ANSI/IICRC S500; ANSI/IICRC S520; NADCA ACR.

4. Phase 1 - Immediate Safety, Access Control, and Evidence Preservation

The first phase is not detailed engineering analysis. It is a controlled decision about whether the site can be safely entered and what conditions must be preserved. The initial team should identify unstable walls, damaged roofs or floors, compromised stairs, energized electrical components, gas leaks, hazardous materials, oxygen-deficient or contaminated atmospheres, fall hazards, water-damaged surfaces, weakened fire escapes, and other conditions that can injure investigators or cause additional building damage. [OSHA 1910.134] [OSHA 1910.147]

- Establish site control, entry logs, photographs, restricted zones, and chain-of-custody procedures where evidence may be present.
- Confirm the status of electrical service, fuel gas, LP gas, water, fire-protection systems, elevators, generators, solar photovoltaic systems, batteries, and other stored-energy systems before entry.
- Do not energize electrical, mechanical, fuel-gas, or HVAC systems until they are evaluated by qualified personnel.

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- Do not begin demolition, debris removal, pressure washing, deodorization, or cleaning that could alter fire patterns, contaminate evidence, disperse hazardous particulates, or conceal structural damage.
- Use proper respiratory protection and PPE when soot, ash, char, lead, asbestos, silica, mold, chemicals, or other contaminants may be present.

A rapid structural safety assessment may be needed before the cause-and-origin investigator, structural engineer, industrial hygienist, electrical evaluator, restoration contractor, or insurer can safely perform detailed work. When conditions are unstable, temporary shoring, bracing, overhead protection, engineered demolition sequencing, or remote documentation may be required before entry.

5. Phase 2 - Document Collection and Preliminary Building History

A reliable fire-damage evaluation should begin with records, not assumptions. Investigators should obtain available drawings, prior permits, repair records, roof information, occupancy classification, construction type, age of construction, renovation history, fire-department incident reports, origin-and-cause information, fire duration information, suppression water use, photographs and videos taken during the fire, utility disconnection records, and any prior structural or environmental reports.

- Structural documents should identify framing systems, material types, load paths, fire-resistance-rated assemblies, bearing walls, shear walls, diaphragms, trusses, post-tensioning, prestressed elements, masonry reinforcement, roof construction, and prior repairs or alterations.
- MEP documents should identify electrical service and panels, branch circuits, fire alarm and suppression systems, HVAC zones, duct routes, return air paths, gas piping, plumbing supply and waste lines, mechanical rooms, fuel-burning appliances, and any special industrial or commercial systems.
- Environmental documents should identify known or presumed asbestos-containing materials, lead-based paint, PCB-containing materials, mercury devices, chemical storage, biological hazards, fuel storage, and pre-existing moisture or microbial issues.

The preliminary history should be used to develop the inspection plan, not to shortcut it. Where drawings or records are missing, assumptions should be verified by field observation, selective openings, non-destructive testing, material sampling, or other appropriate means.

6. Phase 3 - Structural Damage Investigation Protocol

The structural investigation should evaluate the building as a system. Fire damage can affect individual members, but life-safety risk often arises from the combined effect of damaged framing, weakened connections, compromised diaphragms, loss of bracing, thermal distortion, fire-suppression water, corrosion, and post-fire demolition or remediation activities. The engineer should address both gravity loads and lateral loads, including the full roof-to-foundation load path. [ASCE 11] [ASCE 7]

The structural protocol should include observation and documentation of the exterior, interior, roof, attic, crawlspace, basement, foundations, walls, floor systems, roof framing, stairs, decks, balconies, chimneys, parapets, anchors, connectors, and any temporary stabilization. Conditions should be mapped by severity and location. The report should distinguish between observed damage, concealed conditions requiring further evaluation, areas that could not be accessed, and assumptions requiring verification.

- Wood framing should be evaluated for char depth, loss of cross-section, checking, splitting, connector damage, fastener withdrawal, truss-plate damage, glue-line or engineered-wood damage, smoke/heat exposure in concealed cavities, and loss of bracing or diaphragm continuity.

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- Steel framing should be evaluated for distortion, buckling, loss of straightness, connection damage, bolt or weld damage, residual strength concerns, corrosion from water or smoke residues, fireproofing loss, and compatibility with repair welding or reinforcement.
- Concrete should be evaluated for spalling, cracking, discoloration, delamination, exposed or heat-affected reinforcing steel, loss of cover, bond concerns, prestressing or post-tensioning damage, embedded corrosion, and reductions in compressive strength or stiffness.
- Masonry should be evaluated for cracked units, deteriorated mortar, bulging, out-of-plane instability, compromised wall ties, heat-damaged lintels, bond-beam continuity, reinforcement corrosion, loss of bearing, and weakened connections to floors and roofs.
- Foundations and slabs should be evaluated for heat effects, firefighting-water effects, settlement, differential movement, slab cracking, vapor-barrier damage, embedded utility damage, and changes caused by demolition or shoring loads.

Testing should be selected by the engineer based on the material and fire exposure. Possible methods include selective demolition, probing, moisture mapping, reinforcement scanning, steel hardness testing where appropriate, concrete sounding, petrographic or core testing, mortar or masonry sampling, wood char measurements, fastener/connector evaluation, and review of fire temperature indicators. Testing should be coordinated with the fire investigator and industrial hygienist so that evidence and contaminants are not mishandled. [ACI 562] [ACI 318] [AISC 360] [NDS] [TMS 402/602]

7. Phase 4 - Electrical, Plumbing, Mechanical/HVAC, and Fire-Protection Systems

MEP and fire-protection systems should be evaluated independently of the structural system. Fire, heat, smoke, corrosive residues, water, debris, and emergency response activities can damage systems even where no flame impingement occurred. Systems should remain de-energized or isolated until qualified personnel determine that they can be safely inspected, tested, cleaned, repaired, replaced, or returned to service.

Electrical evaluation should include the service equipment, panels, breakers, fuses, grounding and bonding, branch circuits, conductors, splices, receptacles, luminaires, smoke alarms, fire alarm systems, emergency power, batteries, generators, photovoltaic systems, electric vehicle charging equipment, and low-voltage systems. Heat-damaged insulation, water intrusion, smoke residue, corrosion, arcing, energized conductors, and improperly re-energized circuits can create shock, fire, or equipment-failure hazards. Electrical decisions should be made under the applicable adopted electrical code and by qualified electrical professionals. [NFPA 70] [NFPA 70B] [NFPA 70E]

Plumbing and fuel-gas evaluation should include domestic water, sanitary drainage, vents, fuel-gas piping, LP gas systems, gas appliances, water heaters, hydronic piping, backflow protection, fire-suppression water impacts, and pipe penetrations through rated assemblies. Heat-damaged plastic piping, melted seals, displaced supports, damaged gas piping, damaged vents, and contaminated water systems may require pressure testing, replacement, disinfection, or code-compliant repair before use. [IPC] [IFGC] [NFPA 54]

Mechanical/HVAC evaluation is central to both system safety and contaminant migration. HVAC systems can draw smoke, soot, ash, char, and odor compounds into return plenums, filters, coils, insulation, duct liners, diffusers, air handlers, condensate components, and occupied spaces remote from the fire area. The HVAC system should generally remain off until evaluated; using the system for ventilation can redistribute contaminants or damage equipment. Cleaning, replacement, or restoration should address the actual system layout, duct material, insulation type, accessibility, component porosity, contamination level, and post-cleaning verification. [IMC] [NFPA 90A] [ASHRAE 62.1/62.2] [NADCA ACR]

Fire-protection systems should be evaluated for impairment, water-supply reliability, sprinkler head exposure, piping damage, alarm and supervisory functions, fire-pump operation, valve positions, backflow assemblies, control panels, detection devices, notification appliances, and any impairment created during remediation or repair. Where fire-

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protection systems are out of service, the owner and contractor should coordinate impairments, fire watch, temporary protection, and AHJ notifications as required. [NFPA 13] [NFPA 25] [NFPA 72]

8. Phase 5 - Hazardous Particulates and Industrial-Hygiene Protocol

The industrial-hygiene component should be planned early because intrusive structural inspection, debris removal, drying, demolition, HVAC operation, and cleaning can disturb or spread particulates. Hazardous residues may be present in the fire room, adjacent rooms, attics, chases, wall cavities, crawlspaces, HVAC equipment, ducts, closets, contents, porous materials, and remote spaces affected by pressure movement or smoke migration. The lack of visible soot in a remote area does not, by itself, establish that the area is unaffected. [OSHA 1910.134] [IICRC S700]

A qualified industrial hygienist or environmental professional should prepare a site-specific assessment and sampling plan when conditions warrant. The plan should identify target contaminants, decision criteria, sample locations, reference or comparison areas, sampling media, analytical methods, limitations, and clearance criteria. Target contaminants may include soot/char/ash, carbonaceous particulates, PAHs, VOCs or aldehydes, acid gases or corrosive residues, heavy metals, lead, asbestos, silica, fiberglass or mineral fibers, combustion byproducts of plastics and electronics, residues from fire extinguishing agents, and microbial contamination caused by fire-suppression water. [OSHA 1910.1200] [OSHA 1926.62] [OSHA 1926.1101] [OSHA 1926.1153]

Sampling should be used to answer specific questions. Possible approaches include visual assessment, settled-dust sampling, wipe sampling, micro-vacuum sampling, tape lift or bulk sampling, air sampling during disturbance or remediation, surface pH or corrosivity screening, moisture mapping, asbestos and lead surveys, and mold assessment where water damage is present. Sampling should not be used as a substitute for professional judgment; results must be interpreted in context with the fire history, material types, room relationships, HVAC operation, occupant vulnerability, cleanup methods, and analytical limitations.

Remediation should control dust generation and cross-contamination. Work plans should address containment, negative pressure where appropriate, HEPA-filtered air filtration, worker PPE, cleaning sequence, removal versus cleaning of porous materials, handling of contents, HVAC protection, debris disposal, waste characterization, decontamination, and clearance. Encapsulation should not be used to conceal contamination or structurally damaged materials without verifying that the underlying condition has been properly evaluated and that the chosen system is appropriate for the substrate and intended use. [EPA RRP] [EPA Asbestos] [IICRC S500] [IICRC S520]

9. Phase 6 - Repair Design, Permitting, and Re-Occupancy

After investigation, repair decisions should be documented in coordinated repair documents rather than informal instructions. Structural repairs may require engineered drawings, calculations, specifications, temporary shoring details, special inspections, construction observation, and confirmation that the repaired building complies with the adopted building or existing-building code. The scope may include member replacement, connector replacement, diaphragm repair, masonry repair, concrete repair, steel reinforcement, fire-resistance restoration, foundation repairs, or complete removal and reconstruction of damaged assemblies. [IEBC] [ACI 562]

Electrical, plumbing, fuel-gas, HVAC, and fire-protection systems should be repaired or replaced under permits where required and inspected before re-energization or use. Temporary power, temporary HVAC, dehumidification, drying equipment, and remediation equipment should be installed and operated safely so that the remediation process does not create new electrical, fire, moisture, or contamination hazards. [NFPA 70] [NFPA 241]

Re-occupancy should not be based only on completion of cleaning or the absence of odor. The final record should include the structural findings and repair scope, MEP evaluations and approvals, remediation records, clearance documentation, unresolved limitations, areas not inspected, material-test results, permit records, inspection approvals,

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and any AHJ conditions for occupancy or continued use. If concealed conditions remain unverified, the report should clearly state the remaining uncertainty and the recommended additional work.

10. Recommended Minimum Investigation Protocol

For a structure fire involving potential building damage or smoke migration, SEI recommends the following minimum protocol.

- Confirm scene release, safety controls, utility isolation, PPE, access restrictions, and evidence-preservation requirements before entry or demolition.
- Separate origin-and-cause investigation from damage assessment, but coordinate the work to avoid evidence destruction and unnecessary delay.
- Perform a rapid structural safety screening and provide temporary shoring, bracing, restricted access, or demolition sequencing where required.
- Collect building documents, fire-department information, photographs, videos, utility records, and prior repair or environmental records.
- Develop a multidisciplinary inspection plan for structural, electrical, plumbing, mechanical/HVAC, fire-protection, and industrial-hygiene issues.
- Map structural damage by material, system, severity, and accessibility, and identify concealed conditions requiring selective openings or testing.
- Evaluate HVAC systems and smoke pathways before operating air-handling equipment or using it for drying, ventilation, heating, or cooling.
- Prepare a hazardous-particulate and industrial-hygiene sampling/remediation plan when soot, ash, smoke residue, asbestos, lead, silica, mold, chemical residues, or dispersed contaminants may be present.
- Coordinate intrusive testing and demolition with the fire investigator, structural engineer, industrial hygienist, and MEP professionals.
- Prepare repair documents and remediation specifications before reconstruction begins; obtain required permits and inspections.
- Require written clearance, code approvals, and unresolved-limitation disclosures before re-occupancy or final project closeout.

11. Consistency, Limitations, and Public-Safety Purpose

This position statement does not state that every structure fire requires the same level of destructive testing, sampling, or replacement. Minor, localized events may require a narrower scope than a severe fire. However, the scope should be reduced only after competent professionals determine that the reduced scope is appropriate for the building, occupancy, fire conditions, affected materials, systems, and contaminants. The starting point should be a disciplined protocol, not an assumption that damage is limited to what is visually burned.

This position statement is intended for general public information and policy guidance. It is not a project-specific engineering design, environmental clearance, legal conclusion, or substitute for review by the authority having jurisdiction, fire investigator, licensed design professionals, qualified electrical/mechanical/plumbing professionals, certified industrial hygienist or other qualified environmental professional, remediation contractor, insurer, or legal counsel. Final code determinations, permit requirements, evidence-preservation decisions, repair designs, remediation criteria, clearance requirements, and occupancy decisions remain project-specific.

12. Hyperlinked Source List

- NFPA 921, Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations
- NFPA 1033, Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Investigator

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- ASTM E620-18, Standard Practice for Reporting Opinions of Scientific or Technical Experts
- ASTM E1492-25, Standard Practice for Receiving, Documenting, Storing, and Retrieving Evidence by a Forensic Service Provider
- International Building Code
- International Existing Building Code
- International Residential Code
- International Mechanical Code
- International Plumbing Code
- International Fuel Gas Code
- NFPA 1, Fire Code
- NFPA 101, Life Safety Code
- NFPA 241, Standard for Safeguarding Construction, Alteration, and Demolition Operations
- ASCE/SEI 7, Minimum Design Loads and Associated Criteria for Buildings and Other Structures
- ASCE/SEI 11, Guideline for Structural Condition Assessment of Existing Buildings
- ACI 562, Code Requirements for Assessment, Repair, and Rehabilitation of Existing Concrete Structures
- ACI 318, Building Code Requirements for Structural Concrete
- ACI/TMS 216.1, Code Requirements for Determining Fire Resistance of Concrete and Masonry Construction Assemblies
- AISC 360, Specification for Structural Steel Buildings
- TMS 402/602, Building Code Requirements and Specification for Masonry Structures
- AWC National Design Specification for Wood Construction
- NFPA 70, National Electrical Code
- NFPA 70B, Standard for Electrical Equipment Maintenance
- NFPA 70E, Standard for Electrical Safety in the Workplace
- NFPA 72, National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code
- NFPA 13, Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems
- NFPA 25, Standard for the Inspection, Testing, and Maintenance of Water-Based Fire Protection Systems
- NFPA 54, National Fuel Gas Code
- NFPA 58, Liquefied Petroleum Gas Code
- NFPA 90A, Standard for the Installation of Air-Conditioning and Ventilating Systems
- NFPA 90B, Standard for the Installation of Warm Air Heating and Air-Conditioning Systems
- NFPA 96, Standard for Ventilation Control and Fire Protection of Commercial Cooking Operations
- ASHRAE Standards 62.1 and 62.2, Ventilation and Acceptable Indoor Air Quality
- ASHRAE Standard 180, Standard Practice for the Inspection and Maintenance of Commercial Building HVAC Systems
- NADCA ACR, Standard for Assessment, Cleaning & Restoration of HVAC Systems
- OSHA 29 CFR 1910.134, Respiratory Protection
- OSHA 29 CFR 1910.1200, Hazard Communication
- OSHA 29 CFR 1910.147, Control of Hazardous Energy
- OSHA 29 CFR 1926.1101, Asbestos in Construction
- OSHA 29 CFR 1926.62, Lead in Construction

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- OSHA 29 CFR 1926.1153, Respirable Crystalline Silica in Construction
- OSHA 29 CFR 1910.120, Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response, where applicable
- U.S. EPA Lead Renovation, Repair and Painting Program
- U.S. EPA Asbestos Laws and Regulations
- ANSI/IICRC S700, Standard for Professional Fire and Smoke Damage Restoration
- ANSI/IICRC S500, Standard for Professional Water Damage Restoration
- ANSI/IICRC S520, Standard for Professional Mold Remediation

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