

TO: All Fire Departments in South Carolina
FROM: Samantha Quizon, South Carolina State Program Manager
DATE: August 17, 2016
SUBJECT: The Use of Vague Language in an NFIRS Report

Fire incident reports are entered at the local level by fire departments, and the data within them is used by local, state, and national entities. Every fire incident report, and the data within it, must be complete, accurate, reliable, and timely for it to be useful for each level within the NFIRS system.

It is recommended that as much data as possible be entered into a fire report as soon as it is observed and collected by individuals who understand NFIRS. If data needs to be updated, it is recommended that data reflects what is most currently known about a situation. However, sometimes an end user of NFIRS believes it is wisest to enter "other," "unknown," "undetermined," or similar vague language. The reasons of this thinking vary widely, including fear of legal action, lack of confidence, lack of knowledge, and lack of time.

When a fire department routinely enters in vague language, such as "other" or "unknown," for more of their reports, the data cannot be useful for anyone. Rather, an end user should be encouraged by their department to enter more precise language. For example, instead of listing a fire as "other," the end user could put in "154-Dumpster or other outside trash receptacle fire." This is much more accurate than "100-Other Fire." Enough data points of incident type 154 could show a department that there is a serious problem of dumpster fires. Vague language prevents analysis and the actions that can prevent those problems in the future.

Incident types are not the only place where vague language occurs. Fire departments should look closer at their submitted reports and determine where most of the vague language is appearing. Most likely, this language is appearing in the narratives and the Fire Module(s), in which the "Item First Ignited" is often listed as "Undetermined." Whenever possible, end users should be specific and confident in their choices.

To prevent vague language in the future, departments should:

- Enter the most accurate data now so it will help you in the future, in the event you need to recall information about an incident.
- Collect better data the incident scene using a standard field report.
- Ask other fire service personnel, persons involved, or witnesses of the incident to assist you in getting more specific details about an incident.

If you have any questions about this topic or anything related to South Carolina's State NFIRS Program, please contact the State NFIRS Program Manager at (803) 896-1250.