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Home fire attributed to circuit breaker

By ARNOLD J. FRIEDMAN

CLIFTON — A Washington Avenue fire may have been caused by a faulty circuit breaker that has a long history of being undependable, according to Fire Prevention Officer David Meisenberg, who declined to name the model.

There were no injuries and little damages to the one family wood frame residence at 332 Washington Ave. last Wednesday when rafters in the space between the attic and the ceiling of the room below caught fire from overheated electrical wires. Meisenberg identified the cause of the fire as accidental, due to an electrical short circuit.

Firefighters responding to a 9-1-1 call reporting smoke in the house quickly located fire between the attic floor and bedroom ceiling. They also broke through bedroom walls with pike poles where they located hot spots, then smoldering, charred wood, according to Deputy Chief Leonard Swan.

Although there was a smoke detector in the hallway outside the bedroom, there was none in the attic, and since smoke and particulates rose in the attic, the alarm did not sound in the bedroom below, Meisenberg said. His advice to homeowners — put a smoke detector in the attic.

He also advises residents to check circuit breakers periodically by throwing switches back and forth a few times. This "cleans" the terminals, ridding them of corrosion that could cause overheating.

Meisenberg said that what probably happened at the Washington Avenue home is that the circuit breaker did not stop the flow of electricity through an abnormally stressed circuit. The wires overheat, like those in a toaster. Instead of burned toast, burned beams resulted, since the wires were tacked to them in accordance with the code.

There were no code violations, either on the wiring or the automatic switch, but the switch box has a brand history of problems, Meisenberg said. One of them is that they don't always prevent fires. Sources later identified the trouble-prone switch box as an old Federal model that was probably installed when the house was built.

Four fire engines, an ambulance, a deputy chief's car and a police patrol vehicle responded to the scene of the fire.

"Anytime there is a verbal report of smoke or fire in a building, our dispatch center sends an additional company," said Fire Lt. Ken Sna-

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gusky. It's the department's policy because minutes count. The time it would take for the first alarm responders

to get to the scene, determine visually that they need a second company, call for it and wait for it, could be the

difference between life and death.

If the second company is not needed, it's sent back. If it

stays, the fire is considered a two-alarm fire, Snagusky said.