

Testimony of  
City of Detroit Executive Fire Commissioner Eric Jones and Chief of Arson Charles Simms

Before the  
Michigan Senate Judiciary Committee

*(February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016 / 1 p.m. / 402 Capitol Building / Lansing, MI 48933)*

Good afternoon, Chairman Jones and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Eric Jones. I am Executive Fire Commissioner for the City of Detroit and am accompanied by Charles Simms, Chief of Arson, for the Detroit Fire Department. We are here to testify in support of Senate Bills 696 and 697.

I first want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Senator Bert Johnson for sponsoring this important legislation, which promises to help the City of Detroit and other municipalities in their fight against arson by strengthening reporting requirements.

Specifically, Senate Bill 696 seeks to require medical professionals to report to law enforcement if they suspect (1) a fire accelerant was used in an incident causing a person's injury and/or the presence of an accelerant creates reasonable suspicion that the patient committed arson; and (2) the treatment of said injury was sought after a curious and/or unreasonable expiration of time.

Similarly, Senate Bill 697 would compel insured persons who file an insurance claim for a fire-damaged structure to first file a police report when the proceeds for said claim are expected to exceed \$2,000. This is the case right now for fire-damaged motor vehicles.

As you may already know, the City of Detroit and the Detroit Fire Department have been plagued with the proliferation of fires since the 1960's. Although a vast amount of progress has been made in the reduction of fires, there remain additional avenues that can be taken to further combat this problem, specifically relating to intentionally set fires.

Fires that are started in Detroit with the intent to defraud the insurer... for revenge ... or warped entertainment purposes must be curtailed to prevent such destruction from becoming the cultural norm of the city.

There were 4,732 structure fires in Detroit in 2014 and approximately 70% of those were deemed suspicious or undetermined. In 2015, there were 3,852 structure fires within the City of Detroit and approximately 65% of those were deemed suspicious or undetermined. Over those two years, the monthly average of suspicious structure fires was 241 – or 8 per day.

The Detroit Fire Department, Detroit Police Department, ATF, other law enforcement agencies, and participating insurance companies have been working together aggressively and diligently over the years to decrease arson within Detroit and arrest and prosecute arsonists.

Although we have made great improvement – from 6,000 suspicious structure fires in 2000 to 2,500 suspicious structure fires in 2015 and more than 1,800 arson arrests – the numbers are still too high. There is plenty of room for improvement by using tools like these bills.

It's important to note that the Legislature has passed similar legislation. Specifically, **Public Act 413 of 2000** – sponsored by former state Republican state Representative Andrew Richner of Gross Pointe Park, would preclude an insurer from paying a claim of \$2,000 or more for fire loss or damage to an insured automobile until the insured person submits a report on the fire to the appropriate municipal fire or law enforcement agency. The law has been instrumental in decreasing the number of vehicle fraud fires within Detroit. In 2000, the Detroit Fire Department responded to over 30 suspicious vehicle fires weekly compared to approximately 10 suspicious vehicles fires weekly in 2015. This decrease was attributed mainly to the implementation of **Public Act 413 of 2000**.

SB 697 mirrors **Public Act 413 of 2000** and also would deter arson, as well as the fraud associated with that crime. The measure also would allow law enforcement to gain additional information in regards to the cause of the fire.

SB 696 would insure that law enforcement agencies are notified and would allow investigators to gather critical information that could not otherwise be obtained from the fire scene. Historically many of our arrests have come from our Emergency Medical Service notifying our central dispatch that they were transporting a burn victim, which later became a suspect and eventually charged with arson. Although that insight is very helpful, there isn't a mechanism in place for those burn victims, who may have contributed to the cause of the fire, to be flagged and questioned if they were self-transported to any medical facility.

In closing, there is a resurgence of the City of Detroit and the intentional burning of structures must stop. We must proactively work together to protect the citizens and save beautiful neighborhoods. The passing of both SB 696 and SB 697 would assist law enforcement efforts to reduce the number of arsons and fraudulent criminal acts, which would aid in the beautification of Detroit.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, and Senator Bert Johnson for sponsoring SB 696 and 697 and for allowing me to speak in support of these bills. We are happy to answer any questions.