

On a weekday morning, our Hazmat Team was called to assist an Engine Company in the Clear Lake / NASA area of Houston, TX. On arrival, the engine company officer advised us that a car had driven through a fence into the backyard of a one story single family residence and pushed a gas meter into the house. The vehicle was parked on top of the meter halfway inside the house. He did not want his crew to make entry into the house because they did not have any type of monitoring instrument to check for the level of gas in the house.

Because of the time of day and occupancy, we decided that it was necessary to do a quick primary search of the house to check for anyone stuck in the house. Two of us suited up in structural firefighter protective clothing with SCBA and combustible gas indicators (CGI). The engine company was staged down the street due to the potential for explosion.

As we entered the house through a broken down door near the car, my CGI went into alarm at 10 percent of the LEL and then into "over range" (OR). I was holding the monitor at arms length as high into the ceiling as I could reach because natural gas is lighter than air. As I looked at the monitor just past the end of my arm I saw a ceiling fan running in the high vaulted ceiling. I quickly processed the information and concluded that we were in an environment that was well above to upper explosive limit (UEL). Because we were already in the house, we did a quick primary search to insure that no one was in the house, then quickly exited through the front door which we left open for ventilation.

There was no one in the house. We had the gas shut off and it was safely ventilated.

It is important to carry monitoring equipment to aid in your decision making process with this very common type of call. Sometimes, firefighters have to make difficult and rapid decisions based on risk vs. benefit when dealing with natural gas emergencies. This was a very dangerous “common call” that ended with a positive outcome.

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