

Lowell fire tied to an electrical failure

Official says flames spread widely in concealed space

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LOWELL -- The intense fire that gutted an apartment building here and killed seven people, including five members of one family, was sparked by an electrical failure and burned undetected for “a long period of time” before a rush of oxygen fed the flames and turned the building into an inferno, the state fire marshal said Tuesday.

“When the fire took hold of the building, it did so with a vengeance, with heavy, black, choking smoke,” said Fire Marshal Stephen Coan. “You can’t walk through that. You can’t survive that.”

The fire on Thursay, which officials have ruled accidental, started in a concealed void space between the second and third floors that ran the length of the building without any fire stops, said Coan. The fire traveled the entire length of the building undetected before breaking out of the void, Coan said, and when it hit the air, flames engulfed the structure “almost instantaneously.

Though the fire alarm system was up to code, the fire marshal said, the fast-moving blaze disabled it early on. Investigators also determined that though there were fireworks in the building that detonated at some point, they did not play a role in starting the blaze.

Middlesex District Attorney Marian T. Ryan said that no charges are expected to be filed in connection with the fire, which was the deadliest in the Massachusetts since 1994.

“Based on the cause of the fire as determined by the investigation, it is accidental,” said Ryan.

An attorney for landlord Sanjay Patel did not respond to a request for comment, but in a statement issued last week he said he was cooperating fully with the investigation and that his thoughts and prayers were with the victims.

Coan and Ryan spoke at a news conference Tuesday at the Branch Street fire station, a short distance from the burned building, where workers are still sifting through the rubble, and candles burned nearby in memory of the dead.

Five members of one family — Torn Sak, 37, his longtime partner Ellen Vuong, 29, and three of their five children -- Anthony, 12, Ryan, 9, and Sayuri, 7 -- all died. Two unrelated adults, Tina Christakos, 44, and Robert Downs, 72, were also killed.

All seven of the victims were living on the third floor of the building on Branch Street.

The deadly fire began sometime before 4 a.m. on Thursday, and residents who escaped early on reported watching people on the second and third floors leaping from windows and dropping children into the arms of police and firefighters.

Coan said the investigation had not determined exactly how the victims who died became trapped, but said they must have been overcome by smoke.

Fireworks were stored in the Sak apartment, but officials said they could not determine how that affected the family's ability to escape.

Two children in the Sak family did make it out of the building, along with their grandfather, Torn Sak's father. Torn Sak's brother, Thearan Sak, said another child did not leave the apartment with the grandfather, instead running toward his parents' bedroom.

One neighbor reported hearing the grandfather screaming for his family to leave. Another neighbor said he watched from the ground as Torn Sak banged on his window before disappearing.

After learning of the cause of the fire Tuesday, Thearan Sak said, "I just think that it shouldn't have happened. ... It's really complicated right now, it's complicated for me and my family. I'm just speechless."

He said his family is pulling together, and trying to support and comfort the two young boys who survived. "We're getting by," he said.

Roommates of Christakos and Downs have said the two might have stayed behind to gather Christakos' Chihuahuas.

The city has determined that the ruins of the building are dangerous and could collapse, but an attorney representing victims of the fire obtained a court order in Middlesex Superior Court barring the city from demolishing the apartments until at least Thursday, to allow time for an independent investigation into the cause.

"These families have a right to preserve the evidence they may need to find out the truth about what happened," said Douglas Sheff, whose clients include the father of Torn Sak, according to court documents.

The documents allege that the smoke detection equipment and fire hazard and safety equipment was "non-operational at the time of the fire and failed to notify members of the Sak family and others about the fire, preventing their escape and causing extreme burn injuries to the decedents."

Many of the tenants told investigators that they heard some type of alarm sounding at the beginning of the fire, Coan said, and they said those alarms sounded "muffled or intermittent."

But, the fire marshal said, the building was up to code, the fire alarm system was properly maintained, and there was no history of code violations under Patel.

Sheff said he did not understand how functional fire alarms could have been so quickly disabled.

“That doesn’t seem right, does it?” he said. “It doesn’t seem right that the thing that’s supposed to protect you from fire is so easily disabled by fire. That’s why we want to have our own investigation.”

There was no sprinkler system in the building, Coan said, because it was not required.

Some residents reported hearing the fire alarms regularly before the fire, and Coan said that city records show about two visits for false alarms per month by the Fire Department. Lowell Fire Chief Edward Pitta said that was not unusual, as false alarms can be caused by issues like burned food or steam from a shower.

Sheff said his independent investigation could be complete as early as Friday. The city plans to remove siding and debris from the building to keep it safe in the interim, according to the city manager.

A hearing on Sheff’s order is scheduled for Thursday in Middlesex Superior Court.