

New home for family left homeless by fatal Lowell fire

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LOWELL -- Unpacked linens and towels lie on the living room floor of the Ou family's new home on Astor Street. A pair of navy-blue couches line the walls, and aside from neatly stacked DVDs under a TV in the corner, the room remains relatively bare.

The family lost their home and possessions in the three-alarm Branch Street fire on July 10 that killed seven people. They're transitioning into their permanent home after weeks of jumping from hotel to hotel.

Making her way inside, 14-year-old Selena Ou watches her diapered niece slowly crawl over the front doorstep. Selena was the eldest of her siblings in the Branch Street apartment when the fire broke out.

Luckily, the family lived on the first floor, and everyone in the family -- Selena, her three brothers and parents -- escaped safely. Selena said she doesn't like thinking about the past few months.

"To me, it's like a nightmare that's still living today," she said. "It's just (about) trying to move on. I have a new house now, so it doesn't matter anymore to me."

She sits at the dining-room table translating for her mother, Toeur Pin, who does not speak English well.

"She said now that she has a house, she's not as scared as before," Selena said. "She just wants to return to normal, as if the fire never happened."

The Cambodian family is one of 15 families who are finding new homes with the help of the Lowell Housing Authority and Community Teamwork Inc.

Nine other families have been rehoused or are on their way to finding a new home, said Kristin Ross-Sitcawich, director of the Homelessness Prevention Program at CTI. The nonprofit agency is working to find the last five individuals a place to live.

"The vast majority have been placed right back in their original neighborhood, which has been fantastic," Ross-Sitcawich said.

All but one of the families were eligible to receive financial assistance, she said, including rental subsidy vouchers issued through the state.

"Fortunately, through the generosity of the community, we'll be able to assist that one family that's income ineligible," she said.

The fire drew an outpouring of public support great enough to fill the 15,000-square-foot warehouse used by The Wish Project, which has been providing the displaced families with household items.

"Imagine Costco all of a sudden filled 12 feet deep," said Donna Hunnewell, The Wish Project's executive director.

Many people donated new items that ranged from bath towels to kitchen appliances, she said, and the center got a lot of new donors because of the publicity.

"Lowell does it better than anybody in the whole country, and it's great to be a part of it," Hunnewell said. "It's all because of the donors -- the donors really were fantastic."

In the Ou household, nearly all of the furniture is from The Wish Project -- the beds, the blue couches, even the dining-room table where Selena sits with her mother.

Meanwhile, Selena's 10-year-old brother, Brandon, runs upstairs to try out his new donated Xbox.

"This is the nicest house we've ever lived in," Selena said. "We lived in small apartments with three beds, and it cost \$900 a month -- it'd be hard to pay that. Now, it's gone down a bit, in a bigger house."

As the Ou family and others transition into their permanent homes, family members of the deceased victims are looking even further into the cause of the fire.

Tina Christakos and Robert Downs died, along with Torn Sak, his wife, Ellen Vuong, and their three children, Sayuri, Anthony and Ryan Sak.

Although state officials determined that an electrical issue started the blaze, attorneys for the Sak and Vuong family fought successfully to delay the building's razing until they could complete their own investigation.

Douglas Sheff, an attorney working on the probe, said the investigation is for all of the victims' families. Evidence gathered at the scene was later catalogued, Sheff said, but he did not want to go into details.

"We're still working and talking with experts," he said. "We were lucky to be able to have the time to get in and secure the evidence."

He estimated the investigation would take months.

"We're not discounting anybody's information or conclusions, but we're not assuming them either," he said. "We're following every lead just like you do when there's a criminal investigation."