

Ashtabula News Herald

4 Die in Fire

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The firefighter walked out of the still-smoldering house, his face a stoic mask. He held his arms as if to cradle a baby and slowly rocked them back and forth.

The gesture was simple, its meaning obvious: The second toddler had been found.

"This is a sad morning," said a neighbor, providing an understated epitaph for the three children and one adult who were killed in a fast-moving fire which engulfed the home of Charles Sr. and Stephanie Newman Friday morning at 939 W. 43rd St. in Ashtabula.

Ashtabula Township Fire Chief Michael Fitchet said the scene was chaotic when city fire crews arrived at 8:13 a.m., just three minutes after the call was received.

"The fire appeared to have a good head start. (Ashtabula) Chief (Rick) Balog said when he pulled up, (Charles Sr.) was coming out of the house, and was badly burned," Fitchet said. "There was extremely heavy fire upon arrival, with extreme heat."

Knowing that there were people inside, firefighters worked frantically to knock down the flames and permit a search for possible survivors.

"There was a child on the first-floor landing, a child upstairs in the hallway, next to an adult, and a young person in a back bedroom upstairs," said Ashtabula Fire Lt. Ross Caudill. I brought the one child out. I thought he was alive. He wasn't.

The other victims, who were obviously dead when located, were left in the house while Ashtabula County Coroner's Investigator Thomas Kozesky and Ashtabula Fire Inspector Gerald Senger conducted an investigation of the blaze. The bodies were not removed until just before noon, after a representative of the State Fire Marshal's Office arrived from Wooster to begin his investigation.

The dead were identified by Kozesky as Stephanie Newman, 22; Charles Newman Jr., 4; Matthew Newman, 2; and Frances Gray, 16, who was Stephanie's sister. Cause of death is pending autopsies which will be conducted today at the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office, Kozesky said. While the cause of the fire has not been officially released, a fire investigation dog was brought to the scene Friday afternoon. ³

"Normally, on a fatal fire, we contact the state fire marshal and bring in an arson accelerant dog," Kozesky said. "It's just a matter of routine."

Neighborhood residents said they heard what sounded like explosions just before the fire broke out.

The next-door neighbor Jewel Denton, 1003 W. 43rd, said she was getting ready for work about 8 a.m. when she heard two distinct booms.

"By the time I got to the door, the whole house was in flames," Denton said. "The guy that lived there came and told me to call the fire department. He didn't have any clothes on, just what he probably slept in. He was running down the street, telling everybody to call the fire department. He said his wife and kids were in the house."

Denton said the family had only moved into the home a month or so ago. Eyewitness reports indicated Charles Sr. escaped the flames by jumping out of a second-story window. After asking for help from neighbors, he apparently attempted to go back into the house to try to save his family. Kozesky said Charles Sr. was transported to Ashtabula County Medical Center, where he was treated for his injuries and released. He is staying with relatives in the area.

An official report from the fire department will not be available for a couple of days, Caudill said. Ward 3 City Councilman Steven Sargent said it was about 8 a.m. when he had dropped someone off at a house just east of the home that burned.

"There was no sign of fire then," Sargent said. When the fire department arrived at 8:12, it was fully engulfed. Whatever happened, it happened fast. There are so many questions: Why? How?

A man who came to the house about 6 p.m. Friday identified himself only as a friend. He said he visited the home just two nights before the fire. "They were complaining about the smell of gas," the man said. "They complained to the landlord about it."

Kozesky said he had spoken with a representative of Dominion East Ohio gas company, who said the company had been contacted about the problem at the house and had inspected it before the fire without finding any problem.

Many neighbors and curious onlookers watched as the small army of firefighters, police and emergency medical crews converged on the scene and fought to gain control of the situation. Many maintained a somber vigil for another three hours, when the victims were removed from the home. Asked at 6 p.m. how long he expected to stay on the scene, Kozesky said, "As long as it takes to get what we need." Fitchet said the firefighters would be evaluated to see if it is necessary to bring in Ashtabula County's Critical Incident Stress Debriefing team.

"If we think they'll need some help, we'll call them in," Fitchet said. "I'm sure it will have some effect on them. It would have to or they're not human."

Fitchet said in such situations, the firefighters often help each other. "They'll go back to the station and talk about it, vent some," he said. Sargent said he attended the Friday morning press conference concerning the announced consolidation of Ashtabula and Harbor high schools at 10 a.m. before heading over to the fire scene, which is in his ward.

Some people are upset about the consolidation, acting like it's the end of the world," Sargent said. "But (Superintendent William Licate) told everyone at the press conference that the story won't even make the front page, because four people perished in a fire this morning. There are other things more important in life."

The city had experienced one other fatal fire this year. A 4-year-old boy, Michael Eidens, apparently died in his sleep of burns and smoke inhalation in a fire which started in the early morning hours of June 23 at his home at 1652 W. Third St.