

Ashtabula News Herald

Fatal House Fire Deemed Arson

November 8, 2000

By Diana Lewis

News-Herald Staff Writer

Investigators have ruled that a Friday house fire, which has been termed one of the worst in Ashtabula history, was deliberately set.

Representatives of local and state investigatory agencies called an 8 p.m. press conference Tuesday to confirm that the fire which occurred at 8:09 a.m. Friday at 939 W. 43rd St., was an arson.

The victims included: Stephanie Newman, 22; her sons, Charles Newman Jr., 4, and Matthew Newman, 2; and Stephanie's sister, Frances Gray, 16.

All of the dead succumbed to smoke inhalation, according to the Ashtabula County Coroner's Office. Autopsies were conducted Saturday by the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office.

One person was injured in the fire: Charles Newman Sr., 21. Newman was treated and released from Ashtabula County Medical Center, after he reportedly jumped from a window and ran down the street asking for help from neighbors.

Ashtabula Police Chief David Colucci announced that his department, along with the Ashtabula Fire Department and the State Fire Marshal's Office, are working with the Ashtabula County Prosecutor's Office, and the two coroner's offices on possible criminal charges.

"This has been a gruesome case, and is a heinous crime," Colucci said. Capt. Phillip Varckette, special services commander, said there is a suspect, but he declined comment on the identity of that person.

Ashtabula Fire Investigator Gerald Senger said evidence found at the scene of the fire is conclusive that the blaze was started by an ignitable liquid. Burn patterns in the rooms where the fire started (the living room and front foyer) were consistent with an arson.

Varckette said the fire was suspicious "from the first moments of the fire; immediately after it was extinguished." When asked if there was anything to indicate that someone broke into the home prior to the fire starting, Varckette said there was no sign of any forcible entry.

The Newman family had suffered a tragedy just over a year ago in May 1999, when a daughter, 5-year-old Jessica, died of physical asphyxiation after a bunk bed collapsed on her.

A reward of up to \$5,000 is being offered for information leading to the person responsible for the fire. Anyone with information is asked to contact the APD detective bureau at (440) 992-7126.