

**Ashtabula News Herald**

## **Search for Clues Continues**

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By Diana Lewis

News-Herald Staff Writer

Local and state fire officials continue to search for clues Friday's arson fire in Ashtabula that killed a young mother, her two children and her teen-age sister.

At a Tuesday evening press conference, Ashtabula Police Chief David Colucci made it clear local law enforcement and fire officials are doing everything possible to make an arrest in what Colucci termed a "heinous crime."

"We have dedicated numerous hours to solve what is a very gruesome case," Colucci said. "Four people lost their lives, and the fire department, police department and state investigators have worked continuously on this case to bring it to closure."

Colucci confirmed his department has interviewed a suspect in the blaze, but he said he could not comment on whether the fire was set for the primary reason of killing Stephanie Newman, 22, her sons, Charles Jr., 4, and Matthew, 2; and sister, Frances Gray, 16.

A fifth resident of the home, Stephanie's husband, Charles Newman Sr., 21, escaped, and was treated for minor injuries at Ashtabula County Medical Center and later released.

Senger said physical evidence found at the scene was conclusive: an ignitable liquid, spread throughout the living room and foyer of the two-story wood-frame home, was used to fuel the fast-moving blaze that apparently broke out at 8:09 a.m.

A next-door neighbor, Jewel Denton, of 1003 W. 43rd St., said she was getting ready for work 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 Newman was covered with soot.

Capt. Phillip Varckette, special services commander, 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 start of the fire, Varckette said there was no sign of forcible entry.

"We have been in contact with the (Ashtabula County) prosecutor's office since the inception of the investigation," said Varckette. "(County Prosecutor Thomas Sartini) has worked with us on this. We brought them on board Friday night and have been in contact with them every day." While the coroner's office ruled Monday that the cause of death for all four victims was smoke inhalation, the manner of death was not officially ruled homicide until after the State Fire Marshal's Office ruled the fire arson.

Colucci said it is up to Sartini's office to decide what charges to file in the case, but he said they could include four counts of aggravated murder, a first-degree felony that could carry a penalty up to and including death or life in prison without parole; and aggravated arson, also a first-degree felony that can carry a penalty of up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$20,000.

Colucci said the State Fire Marshal's Office is offering a reward of up to \$5,000 for anyone who provides information that leads to the arrest of the person responsible for the fire. Representatives of the state office will be involved in the case until "someone is apprehended and prosecuted."

A joint funeral service for the victims will be held at noon Friday at the Revival Center Pentecostal Church of God, 2201 Cook Road, Ashtabula Township, with the Rev. Mary E. Crago of Faith Freedom Fellowship Pentecostal Church of God, and the Revs. William Evans and Sherry Evans of Covenant Assembly of God officiating. Burial will be in Chestnut Grove Cemetery, Ashtabula.

Calling hours will be from 10 a.m. until time of service Friday at the church.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Newman-Gray family at any KeyBank branch in Ashtabula.

The Ross-Billman Funeral Home, 526 Prospect Road, Ashtabula, is in charge of arrangements.

The State Fire Marshal's Office is asking anyone with information to call the APD detective bureau at (440) 992-7126.