

Ashtabula News Herald

State Officials Probe Site of Deadly Blaze

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By Diana Lewis

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Representatives of the state fire marshal's office spent another full day Monday at the scene of a fire that killed four people Friday in Ashtabula. A large number of investigators were on the scene at 939 W. 43rd St. Ashtabula fire Chief Richard Balog said investigators were determining if the fire was suspicious.

"That's what these gentlemen are here for," said Balog Monday. Balog said an announcement concerning the fire could be made soon. Lee Bethune of the state fire marshal's office was at the scene Monday. He said officials were at the scene trying to determine why the fire started.

"We're trying to rule out different things, and it's still under investigation for the most part," Bethune said.

Ashtabula County Coroner's Chief Investigator Thomas Kozesky said autopsies on the four victims were complete. The Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office determined all four victims died of smoke inhalation. "The manner of death and the cause of the fire are pending investigation," Kozesky said.

Nearly 20 firefighters from Ashtabula and Ashtabula Township responded to the fire call that came in at 8:10 a.m. Friday.

Ashtabula City Councilman and local youth pastor Steven Sargent said he had dropped someone off at the house next door just 10 minutes earlier. At that time, Sargent said, he saw no sign of fire.

City crews arrived on the scene at 8:13 a.m., but it was already too late for the victims: Stephanie Newman, 22, and her sons, Charles M. Newman Jr., 4, and Matthew Newman, 2; and Frances Gray, 16, Stephanie's sister. The boys' father, Charles Newman Sr., 21, survived the fire by jumping out a window.

While initial reports contained some incorrect details, the Ashtabula Fire Department released an official report late Friday.

When firefighters arrived, fire already was blowing out of the first floor of the two- to three-story structure on three sides. Bystanders said there were people in the house.

Crews immediately attacked the fire on the first floor and began to climb the stairs to the second story. At that time, the firefighters found a child's body in the hallway. Hoping the child was still alive, Lt. Ross Caudill picked up the body and took it to medical personnel waiting outside the house.

They confirmed the baby was dead.

While firefighters continued to move into the house, three more bodies were discovered. Stephanie Newman was found in the hallway close to where the baby was found; Frances was found in an upstairs bedroom; and the other child was located in a doorway to the kitchen on the first floor.

The three victims were left in the house while Kozesky and Ashtabula Fire Inspector Gerald Senger conducted an investigation. The bodies finally were removed just before noon, after a representative of the state fire marshal's office arrived from Wooster.

The Ross-Billman Funeral Home, 526 Prospect Road, Ashtabula, is in charge of arrangements. Details, including complete obituaries and times of service, have not been announced.