

# The Gazette

## Seven killed in Park Ex blaze

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The death toll from a horrific New Year's Day fire reached seven late yesterday as firefighters found the bodies of a mother and a father clutching two dead children in the ruins of a four-storey Park Extension apartment.

The fire began about 3:50 a.m. in the basement of the 15-apartment block at 6976 Querbes Ave., and swiftly raced through the building.

St. Michel district fire chief Real Gignac last night would not confirm reports that the fire was caused by an explosion. He said the investigation into possible causes would continue today.

He also said firefighters have not decided whether a second search of the rubble to look for more bodies will be necessary today.

Tenants said the building had no sprinklers or smoke detectors.

"I heard a big bang," said Jacqueline Fitzgerald, who lives two doors away.

"I thought it was just a shooting - a settling of accounts - before I saw the flames. It was the first time I have been really frightened in my life."

About 75 firefighters using 23 vehicles brought the blaze under control about three hours later.

The building was destroyed and about 12 people were left homeless. It was the worst fire in Montreal since a November, 1982, blaze killed eight people in the Waikiki Tourist Rooms, on Lagauchetiere St.

The fire has raised questions about Montreal's system for dealing with survivors.

An ambulance driver with Urgences Sante allegedly refused to take an injured man, who had jumped from a third-storey window, to hospital because he had no cash.

There was no transit bus on hand to shelter survivors in the early morning -3 Celsius weather, as had been promised after previous fires in which victims were left in the cold.

"It was a total collapse of the system," said Civic Party Councillor George Savoidakis. "The right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing."

Police and fire officials did not release the names of the seven victims last night, but The Gazette obtained four names at the scene on an unofficial basis.

Josette Lafortune was found with her month-old baby daughter Katia in her arms. Francois Wilson was found with his 18-month old son Stanley in his arms.

Lafortune and Wilson were said to be in their late 20s.

Sgt. Normand Lemay of Montreal Urban Community police said names were not being made public because next-of-kin had to be informed and because some bodies were so badly burned that police are not certain of their identities.

He said six of the seven victims died in the flames that rapidly engulfed the two-storey apartment building. The seventh died of asphyxiation.

The Sun Youth Organization's headquarters three kilometres away on St. Urbain St. became a nerve centre for the homeless.

"We're clothing them, feeding them, and placing them," said Sun Youth organizer Sid Stevens.

He said 10 survivors were put up at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel and will be allowed to stay until Monday.

Both Stevens and city councillor Savoidakis said Montreal's emergency relief program failed miserably.

"We're supposed to be a city with a heart. Is this the kind of society we want to build?," asked Savoidakis, a member of the governing Civic Party for Jean Talon.

He plans to question the city administration and provincial health officials.

Under a new system that began last year, a city social worker, assigned to look after survivors of fires, is supposed to call a transit bus to fires to provide shelter for people left homeless, Stevens said.

"People panicked and there was no one there to direct anyone," he said.

An official of the city's social welfare department, who refused to give his name, said it is up to the fire department to call the emergency bus.

"That is wrong. That is totally wrong," Stevens said. "There should be no questions asked in a situation of this kind."

"The prime responsibility lies with the social worker," Stevens said, noting that firefighters are too busy fighting flames to call a bus.

"It's the first time that I've seen such a foul-up," Stevens said.

St. Michel fire chief Gignac said the fire department automatically calls the city's social affairs department to look after fire victims.

Savoidakis said the city social worker arrived late, left early and did not do his job. He said a city recreation centre set aside for such problems could have been used to keep people warm.

Stevens said the fire was the worst his organization has dealt with in Montreal in its 32 years.

"What a way to celebrate New Year's," he said.

A string of arson-related fires throughout the year in Montreal has left hundreds homeless.

There have been several serious fires in the province this year.

Four people were killed in a chalet in St. Columban, about 60 kilometres northwest of Montreal, on Christmas Day.

In May, six people were killed in a fire at a nursing home at St. Mathias, 40 km east of Montreal.

In April, four people were killed in a cottage fire near Magog in the Eastern Townships.

In March, four people were killed in a Quebec City rooming house.

The death toll for 1985 has not been tallied yet.