Five dead in Flint, Michigan nursing home blast

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Five people were killed and more than 20 injured in an explosion shortly before 9:00 p.m. Wednesday night at the Clara Barton Convalescence Center in Flint, Michigan. About 100 people, including 93 residents, were inside the nursing home at the time of the explosion. It is believed that a boiler exploded in the basement.

Four were announced dead on arrival at the Hurley Medical Center and another person died in surgery early Thursday. The names of the victims have not been released. Fourteen remain hospitalized at Hurley and the McLaren Regional Medical Center, one in critical condition. Although it was at first believed there might be others still trapped inside the home, authorities now say they have accounted for all staff and residents.

The blast blew out windows and collapsed the building's ceiling. Pieces of mangled roofing metal were left hanging in nearby trees. Neighborhood residents reported that their houses shook from the impact of the explosion. While some witnesses reported smelling natural gas, the exact cause of the blast has not been determined by state and federal investigators on the scene.

Survivors of the explosion, many dazed and frail, received temporary shelter at nearby churches before being transferred to other homes. Wheelchairs and beds were scattered across the nursing home's lawn. Emergency crews were continuing to sift through the rubble inside the collapsed building.

Although no specific building code or other physical maintenance violations have been publicly reported, the Clara Barton home has a history of serious patient care violations. It was the only nursing home in Genesee County to receive a designation of "much worse than the norm" by the state Department of Consumer and Industry Services, based on inspections in 1997 and 1998.

In 1993-95 the home was cited for such violations as physically restraining residents without evidence of need and inadequate assessment records. The state had threatened in 1996 to stop the home from receiving Medicaid patients because it did not comply with a new federal enforcement system.

With no public system in place in the US to provide for the elderly, all those in need must either exhaust their savings and those of their families, live with relatives, or accept substandard care. Only the most well-off sections of the population can afford decent facilities. Nursing home workers are among the lowest paid and overworked, with management putting their financial bottom line above the welfare of both caregivers and residents.

Clara Barton had been owned by the Dallas-based Texas Health Enterprises, which operates other for-profit nursing homes across the country, but the company filed for federal bankruptcy protection last August and had said it was planning to relinquish control of some of its facilities. State officials were still attempting to determine who now owns Clara Barton.

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