

Two firefighters killed, 17 injured in Chicago building collapse

Clement Daly
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At least two Chicago firefighters have died and another 17 were injured battling a massive fire in an abandoned building on the city's South Side Wednesday morning. As fire crews searched for any people inside, the building caved in on them.

The two firefighters killed in the collapse have been confirmed as Corey Ankum, 34, and Edward Stringer, 47. Of the injured, four were reported in critical condition.

According to fire department officials, Stringer and Ankum were searching inside the building when a section of the roof collapsed, sending beams down upon them, killing both men by blunt trauma.

Coworkers said Stringer, a 12-year veteran of the department, was well respected for his "bravery and valor" and "quick wit." Ankum had been a firefighter with the department's Engine 72 for less than two years, and leaves behind three children under the age of 12, including an infant. Firefighters told reporters Ankum was beloved for his excellent cooking and generosity.

The 3-11 blaze is reported to have started around 7 a.m. in an abandoned one-story commercial building in the 1700 block of East 75th Street. According to CFD spokesman Larry Langford, about a dozen firefighters were inside the building when the roof above them collapsed, trapping four firefighters under rubble.

A "mayday" call was issued as firefighters frantically dug through the rubble, pulling away bricks and debris by hand. Eventually crews pulled out their four trapped comrades. Stringer and another firefighter were sent to

Northwestern Hospital, where Stringer was confirmed dead. Ankum was transported to Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn where he died; the fourth firefighter was also taken to a hospital, but details are not yet available.

The cause of the fire has not yet been determined. The building was formerly a laundromat owned by two brothers that went out of business six years ago. One of the brothers, Chuck Dai, explained that they had to stop paying taxes on the property and board it up.

Firefighters said during a Wednesday afternoon press conference that boards at the back of the building had been pulled loose, likely by homeless people in search of shelter from the bitter cold. In the past month, extreme winter conditions have claimed the lives of numerous homeless Chicagoans. (See "Spate of cold-related deaths in Chicago")

According to Chicago Fire Commissioner Robert Hoff, the decision to enter the building was motivated by a fear that homeless people may have been inside. "[P]eople in this kind of weather seek refuge," he said, "and we take no building as being vacant. We do it cautiously, but we go in for people who may try to get out of the cold."

An initial inspection of the roof showed "no indication to the chief officers and company officers at the scene that it was in danger of collapse. That's when we make our decision to go in and do a search," explained Hoff.

It is unknown as of this writing if the disaster claimed any other victims, but firefighters continued their search through the rubble even after their comrades

were rescued.

Another fire broke out early Wednesday morning in an apartment house in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, also on the city's South Side, and ended with one resident dead and two others injured when they jumped from a second-floor landing to safety. The victim is reported to be a man in his 40s who lived on the second floor of the two-and-a-half-story wood-frame house.

Five others were able to escape unharmed, including 53-year-old Robert Nelson. "All of this could have been avoided," Nelson told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter. "There were so many code violations in the building."

Nelson also noted that the landlord had been fixing electrical problems in his apartment only the day before. While smoke detectors were present on the first floor, Fire Chief Jeff Springer said it was still unclear whether or not there were any on the second floor, where the fire is said to have started.

Wednesday's deaths reveal the cost in blood of austerity measures and budget cuts that have driven up unemployment and foreclosures, increased homelessness and hunger, and reduced the residential infrastructure in Chicago's working class neighborhoods to little more than death traps. Before the winter season ends, dozens of residents will experience the brutal deaths of burning in fires or freezing in the bitter winter cold. Other victims will silently suffocate from carbon monoxide poisoning, with barely a mention in the local media and no response from the political establishment.

Deteriorating public infrastructure, worsening social conditions, and strained resources from budget cuts are contributing to a significant rise in both the frequency and intensity of such accidents. Compounding the tragedy of the circumstances, emergency workers increasingly find themselves among the victims of these disasters.

Only last month, five Chicago firefighters were hospitalized after battling a massive blaze in the Glenview area in a parks district building. (See

"Chicago apartment fires kill and injure multiple residents, leave scores homeless")

The Chicago Inspector General's Office is currently recommending that funding for fire services be cut by \$66 million in 2011, as well as proposing a reduction in the number of personnel on fire trucks from five to four.

At hearings held in late October on the proposals, Hoff testified to the potential consequences: "In basic terms, it means lives could be lost, that of civilians and firefighters." He warned further, "Fires are going to grow faster because we're not getting water on it fast enough—property damage is going to skyrocket."

The proposed staffing cuts would also prove deadly since it would provide for an inadequate number of responders to handle large apartment fires. According to Tom Ryan, the president of Chicago Firefighters Union Local 2, "Virtually every ward in Chicago has high-target hazards such as high-rises, high-risk residential occupancies, nursing homes, schools, hospitals, industrial and manufacturing complexes, factories, subway and elevated train systems."



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