Gas explosion levels Michigan furniture store

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A massive explosion Wednesday morning destroyed the William C. Franks Furniture store in Wayne, a working-class suburb of Detroit, killing two employees, and injuring several others.

The explosion was so powerful that it could be heard five miles away, and shook buildings and homes throughout the small industrial city. Video footage showed the store completely demolished, as though it had been hit by a bomb.

Bystanders rushed inside to help Paul Franks, the owner of the store, who was pinned under debris with his clothing and skin still on fire. He was rushed by ambulance to the University of Michigan burn unit, where he is listed in critical condition.

Fire rescue crews continued to search the building for the two employees trapped in the debris, one identified as Jim Zell and the other the store's secretary. Workers using search dogs removed the two bodies from the rubble after hours of searching.

The explosion took place just about 9:00 a.m., just as the store was to open. The death toll could have been much higher, but only three of the 18 people who worked there were on the premises because of the holiday schedule. One young woman employee was running late for work and so escaped the explosion.

The rescue operation is impeded by the state of the building itself, as the entire roof of the large store collapsed into its interior. Rescue personnel are being careful to avoid actions that may cause further collapse, endangering survivors.

The drivers of two autos that were passing by at the instant of the blast were taken to hospitals with what was thought to be minor injuries. A witness who was interviewed by local news said of one of the victims, "his face was full of blood."

The explosion was apparently connected to a gas leak. Consumers Energy, the company responsible for providing natural gas to the area, has shut the major gas main to the neighborhood, which includes other businesses and many residences. At a press conference, city manager John Zech reported that there was at least one caller who warned of smelling gas before the explosion.

Witnesses described the explosion to local news media. An employee of a nearby gas station reported seeing a "huge fireball" moving toward the corner gas station from the furniture store. Windows were shattered on nearby businesses. Residents who were blocks away felt the earth shake from the explosion.

Russel Brothers, a 16-year employee of the store who lives in the neighborhood, rushed to the scene. He told local news that the store employed 18 people, but not everyone was scheduled to be there that morning. "On a regular day, all of us would have been there."

Police closed approach roads and evacuated the entire area around the scene, which included some 300 homes. Many have been allowed to return to their homes, but those who live closer to the scene of the disaster are being told that they will likely have to spend the night in a "warming center" set up near the city hall.

The weather in Michigan has been extremely cold for weeks. Consumers Energy is supervising the return of residents who were evacuated in the area where gas was shut off. Later in the afternoon, a second gas leak was discovered. Wayne City Hall was evacuated for "precautionary" reasons. There is no time estimate given for when all displaced residents can return to their homes.

The police are enforcing limited access to the area.

At the noon press conference, a reporter asked Zech why the Department of Homeland Security was present among the many responders, which included police, fire and many EMS vehicles. Zech replied that he didn't know, but that this was not a "Homeland Security situation."

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