

Fire at Quebec retirement home kills dozens

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A Thursday morning fire at a seniors' residence in L'Isle-Verte, Quebec has resulted in a horrific loss of life. Eight persons were confirmed dead as of late afternoon Friday. Thirty others are missing.

While it is conceivable that a few of the 30 were away on the night of the fire, most of the missing must be presumed dead.

Efforts to search the ruins of the 52-unit seniors' home have been hampered by frigid temperatures, strong winds, and the thick ice that encrusts the doused fire-site. Until early Friday morning, emergency workers also had to contend with smoldering embers. They are now using steam to slowly melt the ice, which measures up to 30 centimeters (or almost a foot) thick.

Many of the seniors living at the three-story Résidence de Havre were in their eighties or older and had limited mobility, relying on either wheel-chairs or walkers to get around. Some suffered from Alzheimer's.

The cause of the fire has yet to be determined. But firefighters, other emergency workers, and seniors' organizations have pointed to the lack of a sprinkler system in the older half of the residence as the main reason for the horrendous loss of life.

The Quebec government only requires sprinkler systems in residences housing seniors deemed to have no mobility.

In the absence of sprinklers, the fire spread rapidly through the older section of the private senior home built in 1997, making it impossible to evacuate the frail residents.

The newer part of the residence, built in 2002 and equipped with sprinklers, suffered little damage from the fire.

Fire departments, coroners' reports and seniors' advocates have long been urging Canada's provincial governments to require all seniors' homes to have sprinkler systems. "Sprinklers could save lives," Alain

St-Hilaire of the Quebec Association of Fire Chiefs, told the *Globe and Mail*. "They'll contain the spread of the fire. They won't put it out, but they'll prevent us from seeing images like we saw today."

Yves Desjardins, the president of the Quebec Association for Elder Care Facilities, a group representing some of the province's private senior-home operators, said his association supports making it mandatory for seniors' homes to have sprinklers. "Every time there is a tragedy, the debate comes back," said Desjardins. "And then, as millions would have to be spent to retrofit seniors' homes, people go soft and start thinking it couldn't possibly happen again."

On Friday, Ontario Health Minister Deb Matthews announced that that province's Liberal government is considering advancing its deadline for older retirement and nursing homes to install sprinkler systems. Last year Ontario became the first Canadian province to make it mandatory for all nursing homes, homes for the disabled, and seniors' residences to install automatic sprinklers, but gave them up to ten years to do so.

Thursday's fire has devastated L'Isle-Verte, which lies some 230 kilometers east of Quebec City. Virtually every inhabitant of the village of 1,500 had a close family connection to the seniors housed in the Résidence de Havre.

Poor fire equipment may also have contributed to the tragedy. Members of L'Isle-Verte's volunteer fire department were reportedly on the scene within eight minutes of being alerted that the residence was ablaze. However, -20 Celsius temperatures caused some of their equipment to freeze.

Only two people were working at the residence when the fire erupted, a staffing-level that met Quebec government requirements. According to press reports, they made valiant efforts to rescue the residents, pounding on their doors as the building became rapidly engulfed in fire and smoke.

Twenty residents did manage to escape the fire.

Due to continuing extreme cold, emergency workers suspended their operations late Friday.

L'Isle-Verte is also contending with a water shortage, as its water supply was depleted by fighting the fire. Residents have been asked to reduce their water consumption and to boil their drinking water.

A Quebec Provincial Police (QPP) spokesman has refused to confirm reports that the fire was caused by an electric heater.

Speaking Thursday, Quebec's Minister of Labour, Agnes Maltais, vowed the province's Parti Québécois government would ensure such a tragedy is never repeated. "If there was a failure, we will act," declared Maltais. But she then added that the government will await the results of coroner and QPP investigations before announcing any regulatory changes.

Quebec Premier Pauline Marois announced Friday that she would be cutting short her efforts to court the world's financial elite at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland so she can travel to L'Isle-Verte.

The L'Isle-Verte fire is the second major tragedy to strike Quebec in the past seven months. Last July, 47 people were killed when a train carrying oil derailed and exploded in the center of Lac-Mégantic. The Lac-Mégantic disaster was directly attributable to corporate cost-cutting and government deregulation, including one-man train crews, poor infrastructure, and the use of a type of tanker-car known to puncture easily to transport hazardous materials.



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