

Portland, Maine: Five young workers die in apartment fire

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On Saturday morning, November 1, Maine's deadliest fire in 30 years killed five young workers in an apartment building near the University of Southern Maine in Portland. Three of the victims were tenants: David Bragdon, 27, Ashley Thomas, 29, and Nikki Finlay, 26. The other two, Christopher Conlee, 25, of Portland, and Maelisha Jackson, 26, of Topsham, were houseguests.

A sixth guest, Steven Summers of Rockland, is now listed in critical condition at Massachusetts General Hospital, where he is being treated for burns. He jumped from a second story window.

Witnesses told the *Portland Press Herald* that the fire was so hot it set an evergreen next to the house ablaze. A neighbor reported seeing a man on fire, rolling on the ground.

A survivor, Nathan Long, posted a Facebook message to three of his fellow tenants, all of whom had died: "the smoke was coming so fast ... so intense. ... The fact I didn't have one minute to kick in doors and save you will eat at me for the rest of my life."

As of Monday night, the cause of the fire had not been determined. City and state investigators, as well as agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, are involved. While there was early speculation in the press about arson, no evidence has yet been found. Lack of repairs to the building, combined with combustible junk on the porch and in the yard, caused the fire to spread quickly.

The building was located at 20-24 Noyes Street, just off of Forest Avenue north of the university campus. It is owned by Gregory J. Nisbet, who owns other rental properties in the neighborhood along with properties in other parts of the city and the Downeast Realty company in South Portland. A search on the Cumberland County Registry of Deeds web site returns

more than six pages of documents—deeds, mortgages, liens, etc.—on properties belonging to him and Margaret G. Nisbet.

Bank of America foreclosed on the 20-24 Noyes Street property on September 8, less than two months before the fire. At the time of the foreclosure Nisbet owed more than \$300,000 on the mortgage, and the District Court in Portland gave him 150 days to make good on his payments.

Nonetheless, the president of the Southern Maine Landlord Association has been quoted as saying that Nisbet is "a good guy."

City Councilor Ed Suslovic and Carol Schiller, president of the University Neighborhood Association, had complained to the city about the building before it burned, according to the *Press Herald*.

Suslovic is quoted saying that "there's been nothing extreme, but I would describe it as a nuisance property for several years now ... I've never been in the house, just on the sidewalk, and the porch was at times loaded with old mattresses and couches."

More broadly, Portland Mayor Michael Brennan said that the city has a large number of renters and it "probably means we should be paying more attention" and be "more vigilant going forward with code issues." The city's fiscal year 2015 budget lists only four full-time positions in the Code Enforcement & Community Services division of the Portland Fire Department (PFD), for a city of 66,000 people.

This laxity comes at a time when Portland's fire department is being reorganized and blamed for staffing shortages. In response to criticism that the fire department was spending over its budget—mainly on overtime caused by inadequate staffing—the city manager commissioned a study of the PFD by Public Safety Solutions, Inc.

That study, delivered in March 2013, stated that “the minimum staffing of any fire unit (engine, squad, and truck) should be at least three individuals,” but that “for reasons of economics, there are few fire rescue departments in the United States that operate with the optimum apparatus staffing (e.g., 5 or 6 firefighting staff members on engines and ladders).”

The study noted that, in addition to longer response times, short staffing of crews can cause delays in the deployment of hoses and gear. It cited statistics from Milwaukee demonstrating that “it may take 34 percent more time for three firefighters to accomplish the work than it does four firefighters.”

It then calculated the number of firefighters and officers needed to staff all of Portland’s equipment, assuming a 42-hour work week and time “off the floor” for training, vacation, sick time and injuries. Using this method, the city needs approximately 270 firefighters and officers, but had only 219 at the time of the study. The department’s fiscal year 2015 budget increases staffing levels by a mere “0.7 of one position.” At the same time, unexplained “contractual services” to outside vendors were up by more than 27 percent over the fiscal year 2014 appropriation.

The Public Safety Solutions study also stated that “the Study Team has never seen a fire department the size of Portland’s with such a limited number of civilian administrative and support personnel.” In fiscal year 2013, the Department had only three full-time administrative/financial staff.

Conversely, at the time of the study’s release the media made hay out of its finding that Portland had 2.81 uniformed personnel per 1,000 residents, significantly above the 1.52 average for 95 other cities of comparable size. However, this statistic presents a damning picture of understaffing of US fire departments, rather than any overstaffing in Portland. It also does not take into account that five islands—including Peaks, Little Diamond, and Big Diamond—are within Portland’s city limits.

According to the city’s Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for fiscal year 2013, the number of uniformed fire department personnel decreased by 12 between 2008 and 2010, as a result of the recession. The number of structural fires stayed fairly even between 2008 and 2011, before dropping in 2012. However, the number of emergency responses

increased from 13,851 in fiscal year 2008 to 15,561 in fiscal year 2013.



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