

Documents reveal that Oakland officials were aware of illegal housing prior to Ghost Ship fire

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The city of Oakland released over 600 pages of documents last week pertaining to the December 2, 2016 Ghost Ship fire, which killed 36 people attending a dance party at the converted warehouse in the Fruitvale district of East Oakland. The files, which are heavily redacted and were only released after over 100 requests by media outlets, make clear that numerous city officials were well aware of the unsafe and illegal living conditions at the warehouse years before the tragic fire took place.

The records detail over 10 code enforcement complaints and 39 code enforcement inspections conducted at the warehouse and neighboring buildings between 2004-2016, for violations including illegal residential use, constructing a house without a permit, homeless camping on a vacant lot, and excessive trash and rodent issues. Despite these complaints and violations, city code enforcement inspectors never actually went inside the warehouse, according to the documents released.

Since 1999, the Oakland Fire Department—which has a station less than 200 yards from the warehouse—was called to the warehouse and adjacent buildings 16 times, most recently in 2016.

The Police Department responded to 19 separate incidents over the past decade, including allegations of drug sales, stabbings, thefts, fights and an alleged rape. A February 2015 police report following an incident explicitly described the warehouse as “illegally shared housing.”

Despite this ample documentation, no effort whatsoever was made by city officials to address the perilous conditions. None of the documents describe any actions taken to bring the building up to code, or

even to conduct a thorough inspection to fully document the dangerous conditions.

The most recent complaints regarding the warehouse occurred on November 13 and 14, three weeks before the deadly fire. The building inspector who went to the warehouse was unable to enter the building and sent a request to the owner to gain entry.

In February 2015, the police were explicitly informed that the warehouse was functioning as an illegal residence. In a transcript of a 911 call, the caller claimed that a man armed with a shotgun was hiding near the warehouse, which they described as “a warehouse that is also an illegal shared housing.”

In an interview with the *LA Times*, Shelley Mack, a former tenant at the Ghost Ship, said that she was the caller that day. She told the *Times* that she witnessed an officer enter the warehouse, saying, “He came inside and saw everything.”

“The officer that escorted my son and I out when I moved out a week or so later was told too. He was inside. They almost always came inside,” Mack said.

Another incriminating incident took place on March 1, 2015, when a 911 caller complained about an illegal “rave” taking place at the warehouse, involving drug and alcohol sales. The caller claimed that there were “15 people barricaded” inside the building, and that “the owners are holding people inside.” They also reported hearing the sound of a Taser and threatening remarks.

According to the report filed by Officer Hector Chavez afterwards, officers went to the warehouse and “stood by and preserved the peace as people left the scene.” Shortly thereafter, other officers responded to a caller complaining that “there were several subjects

inside his warehouse refusing to leave.”

In his report, which was heavily redacted for public release, Chavez wrote that the warehouse appeared to be an illegal cabaret, or “any place where the general public is admitted, for a fee, entertainment is provided, and alcohol is served.”

The converted warehouse was never licensed as a living space or cabaret, yet the officers neglected to issue any citations to the owners profiting from the lethal conditions. Chavez wrote that the police ordered everyone out of the warehouse without making any arrests, noting, “I did not detain, handcuff or search anyone while on scene.”

The Ghost Ship was well known among artists in the Bay Area as a venue for such underground parties. On the night of the tragic fire, dozens of people had come to the warehouse for a similar dance party, with many likely not knowing the dramatically unsafe conditions at the site.

The fire was the deadliest structural fire in the United States in over a decade and the deadliest in California since the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. All but one of the victims killed were there to attend a dance party, with most in their 20s and 30s.

Mike Madden, the father of 23-year-old Griffin Madden, who was killed in the fire, told the *New York Times* that the released documents “validate the view that the fire was preventable.”

Attorney Mary Alexander, who is representing the families of seven victims in lawsuits against the property owners, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the records will “show the city knew what was going on in this warehouse and they failed to take any action to red-tag, close it down or help the people living there or coming to events.”

City officials have still not declared the suspected cause of the fire, but attorneys representing the warehouse lease holder, Derick Ion Almena, recently claimed that their private investigation demonstrates that the fire started in an adjacent building. The blaze and thick smoke quickly engulfed the warehouse, which residents and concert attendees have described as a death trap filled with flammable materials.

Of all the departments that bear responsibility for the Ghost Ship fire, the Oakland Fire Department has come under the most intense scrutiny. One of the chief criticisms of the department is that they failed to adhere

to a policy requiring annual inspections of all businesses in the city, and deleted this policy from the department’s web site shortly after the fire.

The department had over 60 job vacancies prior to the fire, including the position of fire marshal. Despite legally being required to inspect all 11,000 commercial buildings, like the Ghost Ship warehouse, each year, the city has only 11 building code inspectors.

Oakland’s fire chief, Teresa Deloach Reed, has been on an unannounced leave for at least three weeks. She left shortly after a local fire protection meeting where she went on a 10-minute rant, including threatening to sue a homeowner for defamation. The fire department administration under Reed was recently accused of falsifying inspection documents by Oakland firefighters union Vice President Zac Unger.

Unger told the *San Jose Mercury News*, “All I will say is we’ve had no official notification that she’s gone but we haven’t seen her in weeks. We have also had no official notification of when she’s coming back.”

Residents at the Ghost Ship warehouse, like those living in hundreds of similar modified warehouses across the US, were forced into their unsafe and illegal housing conditions due to the unrelenting increase in the price of rent and the overall cost of living. Oakland in particular has seen skyrocketing housing costs in recent decades, and now has the fifth highest median price of rent among major American cities.



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