

Families forced to rely on charity after Wisconsin explosion

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17 July 2018

In a press release issued Friday, July 13, Bear Communications, hired by Verizon to complete a fiber-optic project in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, identified VC Tech Inc. as the subcontractor that struck a gas main last Tuesday, resulting in devastating explosion that killed firefighter Cory Barr and left dozens of residents homeless.

Bear Communications further stated that none of their workers were in the area but that they would continue to “fully cooperate with authorities” in their investigation. Bear Communications did not identify where VC Tech is located, nor does there appear to be a web site for the company.

VC Tech Inc. has made no statement since being identified as the subcontractor “responsible” for the blast.

Photos and eyewitness reports confirm that the truck working in the area had a Bear Communications decal on it; however, Bear stated in its release that it “provides its subcontractors with magnetic signs with the Bear Communications logo for their vehicles.”

The investigation into the deadly explosion is still “ongoing” a week later with little information being divulged by the authorities. It took more than three days for the name of the subcontractor to be released, with the various companies involved seeking to deflect as much responsibility as possible for the tragedy.

On Saturday, a memorial service was held for firefighter Cory Barr, with hundreds in attendance including first responders and the fire department. The service took place at Sun Prairie High School, which has also hosted residents who have been displaced or recently made homeless by the explosion.

Over a dozen families in the city of roughly 30,000 residents are seeking funds via GoFundMe campaigns to replace clothes, bedding, and other essentials that

were lost in the fire. The Barr House tavern and Glass Nickel Pizza restaurant, which had living quarters above them, were both destroyed.

Forced to rely on charity, families such as Kenya Johnson with her sister and children, who lived above Glass Nickel Pizza, are trying to piece their lives back together. Johnson was running errands with her sister when she returned home to find the street blocked off and her apartment on fire.

She described the scene to local reporters. “When we got back it was chaotic, we couldn’t even get through. The street was all blocked off,” Johnson told WMTV. “It was a crowd. I just watched the house burn down.” Her children were evacuated by firefighters moments before the explosion engulfed their residence.

The Johnson family had moved into the apartment around a year and half ago after being homeless for three years. They are now staying with extended family, for the time being; however, she does not know where they will be staying permanently. As Kenya stated on her GoFundMe page, “This has also left us crippled and yet homeless once again.”

While families such as the Johnsons have been able to stay with family, other workers who lost their homes have been forced to spend the evenings sleeping in their car, or at the temporary Red Cross shelter located at Sun Prairie High school.

Trina Nerge, a disabled veteran, had just moved into her apartment 10 days prior to the blast with her dog Harley. While both managed to escape with their lives, all of her possessions were lost in the fire.

It is not just homes, personal items and family heirlooms that have been lost in the explosion; workers lost their jobs as well. Alexander Mortier was a part-time delivery driver, working six days a week at Glass Nickel Pizza. His meager earnings left him with weekly

paychecks totaling no more than \$75-\$80 supplemented by tips and delivery fees. Now that the restaurant is no more, Mortier and other workers are scrambling to find new employment and sources of income.

The government, while hailing Cory Barr and the heroism of the volunteer fire department, has said little and done very little for affected families, instead offloading its social responsibility to “charities” such as the American Red Cross.

As in all such tragedies, the outpouring of community support and the generosity shown by workers to those affected have been heartening, sharply contrasting with the corporate stonewalling. However, the response also typifies the anarchy and indifference endemic to the capitalist system. Entire families have been left at the mercy of charity as the parties responsible for the tragedy seek to downplay their role in the disaster.

While it is likely that the explosion was the result of an accident, it is no accident that so many workers, not only in Sun Prairie, but throughout the world, are one unforeseen calamity away from being left homeless or destitute.



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