

One year since Massachusetts' Merrimack Valley gas explosions

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Friday, September 13 marked the first anniversary of the devastating gas explosions that ripped through the Merrimack Valley in Massachusetts. Two days prior, Columbia Gas of Massachusetts, the company responsible for the tragedy that killed one person, hospitalized 21 others and displaced more than 8,000 people across the city of Lawrence and the towns of Andover and North Andover, notified the state that it will need to reinspect 700 of 4,900 service lines that were abandoned and replaced after the explosions in Lawrence, North Andover, and Andover.

The new inspections are required as the company suspects two of the abandoned lines might not have been capped properly or confirmed to be in compliance with government regulations. The company discovered the issue in July but waited until the eve of the anniversary to report it to the state. Hundreds of residents and business owners, still reeling from the explosions and fires of a year ago are now being contacted to schedule yet another utility inspection.

Columbia Gas officials insisted that the public is not at risk, but many residents find it hard to believe a company that deliberately risked the health and safety of the public in its drive for profit.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said in a preliminary report that the immediate cause of the disaster was due to a contracted crew failing to account for a critical sensor in a line that was being replaced. Once the line was disconnected, the sensor detected a loss in gas pressure that caused the system to pump a large amount of gas into live lines and from there into people's homes.

The preliminary report issued in November 2018 adds: "Columbia Gas developed and approved the work package executed on the day of the accident. The work package did not account for the location of the sensing

lines or require their relocation to ensure the regulators were sensing actual system pressure. The work was performed in accordance with steps laid out in the work package."

The Columbia Gas explosions triggered more than 12 fires across the Merrimack Valley and leveled five homes. Thousands of people were rendered homeless overnight and forced to live in temporary housing for months as they waited for their appliances and boilers to be repaired or replaced. Many are still suffering.

A *Boston Globe* report on September 15 relayed the experience of Tuongvi Huynh who said that ever since Columbia Gas replaced her boiler and furnace, the temperature of her shower has fluctuated quickly between scalding and numbing cold.

Huynh had contacted Columbia Gas about once a month since November but with no results. "Finally, this week, the company told her in an e-mail that it is not responsible for valve issues," the *Globe* reports.

There are hundreds of reports across local media of people still struggling one year later. The *Boston Herald* reports that Emad Awad, a pizza shop owner in Lawrence, is not sure how long he can keep his store open. "It's been so dead slow, I'm thinking I'm about to close it down and just go out of business," he told the *Herald*.

Awad said he was reimbursed by an insurance company through November 19, the initial deadline for gas to be restored. But the deadline was pushed into December and he couldn't reopen until January.

As with many other businesses, Awad's customers turned elsewhere in the aftermath of the explosions and recovering the lost business is proving impossible. With a per capita income of just \$18,069 and a 24.2 percent poverty rate, Lawrence is the poorest city in Massachusetts.

For some, the losses were more than financial. The tragic death of 18-year-old Leonel Rondon was widely reported at the time. Leonel had just been with his father to the Lawrence Registry of Motor Vehicles to pick up his first driving license. Leonel's father drove him to a friend's house where he proudly took the wheel as he and three friends sat together in an SUV in the driveway of a house on Chickering Road. Within a few minutes the music coming from the car speakers was drowned out by a deafening boom and within seconds the 62-year-old house was in ruins.

Omayra Figueroa and her 21-year-old daughter Shakira were in the house when the explosion happened. Omayra was thrown 12 feet through the air, landing under a heap of rubble. Remarkably she was not hurt and was able to go to the aid of her daughter who was trapped beneath the wreckage and suffered severe damage to her pelvis and legs.

The blast had ripped the chimney from the house, and it landed on the SUV, trapping the four young men inside. Leonel suffered the worst and died later after being airlifted to Massachusetts General hospital in Boston.

A memorial sign marking Leonel A. Randon Square was placed on Chestnut Street, September 13, not far from where he lived with his family.

The NTSB attributed the cause of the explosion to an oversight by a contract crew but the blame for this tragedy goes much further.

Bart Maderios told NBC Boston at the time of the tragedy that he had managed the regulation of gas pressure in the pipelines of Columbia Gas through the Merrimack Valley until the end of the summer of 2018. Maderios revealed that early in that year he began to dislike what the company was doing. Columbia Gas had initiated a major restructuring that reduced his department, the Measures and Regulations Group, from four people to one. Maderios said this seemed reckless and along with other decisions made him increasingly concerned about public safety.

Maderios announced he was retiring at the end the end of the summer, but he issued a damning trail of warnings that underneath the streets of the valley was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

The cutbacks were intensified following legislation in 2014 which forced the gas companies to replace the old system with new plastic pipes. Columbia and its \$10.3

billion parent company, NiSource, in order to avoid a financial hit to shareholders, began to cut costs, part of which was the eviscerating of the Measures and Regulations Group.

According to a NTSB report, Columbia Gas allegedly ended the practice of having someone from that department monitor pressure while construction was underway. NTSB also said that the company told engineers that they didn't need every department to sign off on their construction drawings. Save time, save money, get the job done was the order.

Maderios said he had warned both Dana Argo, Columbia Gas's operations manager, and general manager Frank Davis that shortcuts implemented so the company could upgrade its outdated infrastructure more quickly and cheaply were creating serious dangers of their own. He says his warnings were ignored.

The result was the devastation of September 13, 2018 that still haunts the population of Merrimack Valley.



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