

Explosion and fire in apartment complex in Gaithersburg, Maryland, kills 1 and injures 14

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An explosion and fire extensively damaged an apartment building and adjacent structures at the Potomac Oaks Condominium Complex in Gaithersburg, Maryland, on Wednesday morning. The incident killed one person and injured 14 others.

As of this writing, individuals living in one of the units are still unaccounted for. Montgomery County Fire and Rescue crews received a call at around 8:40 a.m. of a structure fire, fed by natural gas, and possible explosion at the complex. About 100 firefighters got the flames under control by 9:30 a.m. that morning and rescue operations began.

The following morning, a body was recovered from the debris and transported to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Baltimore for investigation. The victim has not yet been identified. Marcus Jones, Chief of Police for Montgomery County, said that the incident was now a criminal matter and would be investigated. Jones said they had limited information that the explosion was a “criminal, intentional act.”

Heavy equipment and a crane were needed to sift through the debris, as opposed to rescue crews, owing to the structure of the building, said Service Chief Scott Goldstein to the *Washington Post*. The building, erected in 1967, was made using concrete slabs, which contributed to the building’s instability and “pancaked” in the explosion.

Brown Station Elementary School, located directly on the opposite side of the street from the buildings, was placed under lockdown, and a shelter-in-place order was given an hour later. Students were then dismissed early from school, and parents were instructed to pick up their children at a nearby youth center.

Valeria Vasquez-Salmeron, a student there, recalled

to DC News Now, “We heard [a] thump as well then we had to go into shelter which was really scary, and everyone thought that the fire was like in the [school] building.”

Her younger sister, Alexia, mentioned that their cousin lives in the complex and was worried such a situation would happen to him: “I felt ... scared for the people that were living in the apartments because I didn’t want anything to happen to the people,” she said, adding, “My cousin lives there and I’m scared for him.”

Iris Nolasco, who owns a unit in the complex, told Mike Hellgren of Baltimore station WJZ-TV that her daughter and granddaughter, who lived in the unit, barely managed to escape with only the clothes on their backs. Her daughter had called 911 on two occasions within the past month to report the smell of gas, both calls made one week apart. Both instances were investigated, and on both occasions they were assured everything was okay.

Several incidents within Montgomery County in recent years, both involving natural gas, have also cast concerns regarding gas lines in the county.

In August 2016, seven people were killed after an explosion destroyed an apartment building at the Flower Branch Apartments in Silver Spring. Washington Gas, which has a monopoly on gas in the area, was fined \$750,000 in 2020 after it failed to notify the Public Service Commission that it had not yet replaced all its mercury regulators, despite a commitment to replace the regulators by 2012. A faulty mercury regulator, which regulates natural gas flow, can cause gas to build up and ignite if not installed correctly.

In March of this year, a flash fire and explosion hit the Friendly Gardens Apartments in Silver Spring and injured 14 people, when a maintenance worker accidentally cut a gas pipe which he thought was a water drainage pipe. Questions were raised about whether the 50-year-old gas lines were labeled and whether the maintenance workers hired by the apartments were properly trained.

In addition to the increasingly high cost of living, working families face the threat of decayed social infrastructure as the winter months set in.

According to the most recent National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), “On average, a fire department responded to a fire somewhere in the US every 23 seconds in 2021. A home structure fire was reported every 93 seconds, a home fire death occurred every three hours and eight minutes, and a home fire injury occurred every 47 minutes.” The report noted that this represents a 14-year high.



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