

House fire explosion in Northern Virginia results in firefighter death, multiple injuries

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An explosion at a two-story home in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington D.C. on Friday led to the death of a volunteer firefighter and injuries to 13 others, who had been investigating complaints of a gas leak. The explosion was felt for miles and shook homes off their foundations throughout the neighborhood.

Loudoun County Fire and Rescue identified the deceased as Trevor Brown, a 45-year-old member of the Sterling Volunteer Fire Company, based out of Sterling, Virginia. Brown leaves behind a widow and three children, ages 6, 9 and 11.

Other responders suffered “limited to more severe” injuries, said Loudoun County Assistant Fire Chief James Williams at a press conference Friday. According to the Loudoun Fire and Rescue’s Twitter/X account, of the injured firefighters, “four remain hospitalized at local area hospitals” as of Saturday.

“He was a fantastic father,” said Thomas Brown, the deceased’s father, to the *Washington Post*. “He was so much better than me. He and his wife poured everything into those children. You just don’t see that in the world today.”

The firefighters had been investigating a home near the crossing of Seneca Ridge and Silver Ridge drives in Sterling, Virginia, roughly 30 miles to the west of Washington D.C. At about 7:40 p.m., neighbors called to report a gas leak emanating from the residence. After a brief inspection, firefighters identified a 500-gallon propane tank on the residence with a leak that had “migrated into the homes,” according to the fire chief, who ordered the homeowners to evacuate and called in a hazardous materials (HAZMAT) team to the scene.

At around 8:25, the home exploded with such force that the impact was felt across the Potomac River in the state of Maryland. The actual cause of the explosion is still being determined, although Sterling Volunteer’s

Chief Keith Johnson told the *Times* it is assumed to be “propane-related.”

The scene outside the home was “total devastation,” Loudoun County Chief Williams told reporters. According to neighbor Sean Mohseni, whose own home nearly collapsed on him and his family, the surrounding community was left looking like “a war zone.”

In a comment to the *New York Times*, AJ Albaladejo, another neighbor, assisted two women living in the residence who were “just outside of the driveway and leaving the premises when the house exploded.” The neighbor, a nurse, tended to the two women, who were in a state of shock and “bleeding from their faces and heads,” noted the *Times*.

According to Sterling Volunteer’s Chief Johnson, the propane tank had been provided by a local gas company. Washington Gas, the local utility provider, released a statement explaining that it was investigating “the integrity of our system in the surrounding area” to make sure other incidents did not occur.

Throughout the region, propane- and gas-related explosions have been increasingly frequent. A series of gas explosions in southeast Washington D.C. in January led to the complete destruction of a convenience store and damage to a daycare center. The buildings were damaged less than 30 minutes after firefighters ordered them evacuated.

Nationally, propane-related incidents have been on the rise. Last Thursday, an explosion involving a natural gas truck in Los Angeles injured nine firefighters, two of whom were hospitalized.

The National Fire Protection Association reports that there were more than 11,000 propane-related fires a year in the United States in the time period from 2017 to 2021.

A 2022 edition of Fire Protection Research notes the average cost of damages from propane fires has tripled since 2010, from \$200,000 to \$600,000 in 2020. The danger was attributed to the growing usage of propane tanks in building structures, owing to the gas's relative affordability compared to other heating sources.

In response to the event in Sterling, Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin's office published a statement feigning sympathy for the victims. "Our hearts are with the Sterling community and we are praying for the family of the brave firefighter who gave their life," his office declared. "We are grateful for those fearless heroes who run toward danger to protect and serve their fellow Virginians everyday."

Virginia relies heavily on volunteer firefighters, which make up over 70 percent of the state's forces. A state legislature-appointed work group last year found 18 percent of localities were unable to meet growing demand for firefighters and EMS crews, which had increased by 39 percent since 2021. Another 70 percent of all localities could meet demand "only sometimes, never or rarely."

The report's authors recommended that the state assume responsibility for funding firefighters and EMS in the localities, rather than leaving it up to the communities themselves. The Youngkin administration's response was to bury the report, with administration spokesperson Macaulay Porter informing a local NPR affiliate that the recommendation was "misguided."



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