

Death toll rises in Fall River, Mass. assisted living tragedy: Safety violations and fire department understaffing exposed

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The devastating five-alarm fire that ripped through the Gabriel House assisted living facility in Fall River, Massachusetts, on Sunday, July 13, 2025, has now claimed its tenth victim, Brenda Cropper, 66, who succumbed to her injuries after being hospitalized in critical condition. This tragic event, which also left dozens injured and two still in critical condition as of Thursday, has exposed profound questions about the safety, oversight and underfunding of facilities housing vulnerable populations, as well as critical understaffing within the city's emergency services.

A preventable catastrophe

While the fire's origin and cause remain under investigation, Fall River Fire Chief Jeffrey Bacon stated that the flames broke out in a room on the facility's second floor and said he was convinced that there was "nothing intentional about this fire." The Bristol County District Attorney's Office also stated the cause "does not appear to be suspicious." However, this official narrative immediately runs up against serious concerns regarding the facility's operations and emergency preparedness.

Eyewitness accounts from firefighters paint a harrowing picture. They described "seeing faces in windows and having to decide who they needed to rescue" amid heavy black smoke, flames blowing out the front door, and residents trapped in their rooms. Chief Bacon himself, overcome with emotion, stated there was "no doubt in my mind" that the "fire was destined to kill 50-plus people" and lauded his firefighters' heroic efforts in saving "countless lives." This stark assessment underscores the extreme danger faced by the 70 residents of the assisted living facility, many of whom were non-ambulatory, disabled or suffering from chronic health conditions.

Gabriel House, which opened in 1999 and featured older-looking carpeting and furniture, was an assisted living residence, a distinction that subjected it to a different,

potentially less rigorous, inspection and regulatory process than Massachusetts nursing homes. The record of the facility, which is up for recertification in November 2025, reveals alarming deficiencies in its operation.

Violations at Gabriel House

During its last onsite visit in October 2023, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging & Independence found Gabriel House "was not in compliance with state regulations." These alleged violations, which primarily concerned missing documentation, posed critical safety risks to residents.

- The residence reportedly "did not consistently document for each 24-hour period in the Correspondence Log" and failed to use it "to communicate all significant or pertinent information necessary to maintain the continuity of care for all Residents."
- Documentation for monitoring the effectiveness of its "Evidence Informed Falls Prevention Program was missing for all calendar years." Falls are one of the leading causes of death in the senior population.

- Personnel records for three employees were missing documentation of pre-employment physical examinations.

- A plan of correction was submitted and a certificate issued in December 2023, allowing the assisted living facility's continued operation, but violations reveal that a tragedy was waiting to happen.

A former certified nursing assistant, Jenn Marley, who worked at Gabriel House in 2018 and 2019, told the *New York Times* she never saw staff perform fire drills. She noted that despite a population including many older patients with mobility limitations who used walkers, wheelchairs or scooters, employees were simply told, "There's an evacuation plan posted on the wall." This alleged negligence highlights a critical failure in preparing residents for an emergency.

Displaced residents and relatives reported "substandard conditions" at Gabriel House. A nearby restaurant owner told

the *Boston Globe* that the building was known as “unsafe” and “filthy” inside, with patrons having previously called the city about poor conditions “to no avail.” Some individuals familiar with the property also noted that residents had smoked indoors, despite regulations forbidding it.

Understaffed fire department

The tragedy has brought into sharp focus the long-standing issue of understaffing within the Fall River Fire Department, a problem that union officials explicitly stated could have cost more lives, ABC news reports.

Fall River fire companies were operating “below national standards.” The National Fire Protection Association recommends four firefighters per fire engine, but Fall River typically operated with only three. For about 20 years, only two of the city’s 10 fire trucks met the minimum staffing standard of four firefighters.

Edward Kelly, president of the International Association of Fire Fighters, asserted that proper staffing would have meant “eight more firefighters on scene,” CBS Boston reports. He emphasized that “the staffing issues in Fall River aren’t just a Fall River problem” but are widespread across Massachusetts and beyond, arguing against having “the conversation after the tragedy.”

Days after the fire, Mayor Paul Coogan announced at a press conference an agreement to increase fire department staffing, adding \$1.5 million to the budget. As of Wednesday, July 16, this meant six trucks would now have four firefighters, up from two. The city plans to hire 15–20 additional firefighters over the next two years, though Fire Chief Bacon noted the hiring and training process takes 9 to 12 months, with overtime filling the gaps in the interim.

While Chief Bacon initially questioned whether more personnel would have saved more lives, he later acknowledged that increased staffing would enable “faster fire suppression efforts, faster rescues, and allow our firefighters to work safer, which in turn makes every citizen of the city safer.”

In addition to the 10th fatality, Brenda Cropper (66), the victims include Rui Albernaz (64), Ronald Codega (61), Margaret Duddy (69), Robert King (78), Kim Mackin (71), Richard Rochon (78), Eleanor Willett (86), and Joseph Wilansky (77); one 70-year-old woman remains unidentified. Their lives were tragically cut short in a city ravaged by industrial decline.

Fall River, once a leading hub of textile manufacturing, is one of Massachusetts’ poorest cities, with over 20 percent of its population living below the poverty line and a median household income roughly half the state’s median.

These dire economic conditions are directly linked to the

conditions at Gabriel House. More than 75 percent of its residents were on MassHealth, the state’s Medicaid plan. Fall River residents have been shaken by the tragedy, voicing concerns that these elderly residents lacked financial support and could not afford better care. Eleanor Willett, one of the victims, reportedly chose Gabriel House because it allowed her to save money to play casino slots, as she earned too much for Medicaid but not enough for higher-priced assisted living, local PBS station GHB reports.

The Trump administration’s “Big Beautiful Bill” is projected to cut more than \$1 trillion from Medicaid spending over the next decade, comprising the majority of the overall health spending cuts in the legislation. The bill includes historic cuts to Medicaid that include work requirements, changes to provider taxes that states use to fund Medicaid services and higher out-of-pocket fees for enrollees.

According to Jeanne Delgado, vice president of government affairs with the American Senior Housing Association, these cuts could cause states to rebalance or review their long-term care spending, including funding for home and community-based services that cover some of the costs of assisted living.

The preventable tragedy at Gabriel House demonstrates the potential suffering posed to vulnerable populations, particularly the elderly, by the savage cuts to social programs relied upon by millions. At the same time, Trump’s bill allocates \$170 billion for immigration and border enforcement, targeting millions of undocumented immigrants—as well as permanent residents and citizens—with its ICE Gestapo roundups and detention. The 2017-era tax breaks for the super-rich are also preserved.

A social system that relegates its senior citizens, after a life of work and caring for their families, to wretched conditions such as those at Gabriel House has outlived its usefulness and deserves to perish.



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