

Fatal fire's aftermath



Susan Danseyar/Hearst Connecticut Media

Somers Strong signs have been put up in town, including one in front of the Somers Fire Department on Main Street.

COVID h spread in but track remains c

By Vincent Gabriel
STAFF WRITER

As people return to following the holidays a to school, there has thread: someone kn has been dealing wi COVID-19.

"Many people I'm about lots of peopl now," state Departme Commissioner Dr. M earlier this week dur ence call. She expla tests conducted at h the state can see ar spread of COVID-19
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Somers Strong: Community comes together to help, heal

By Susan Danseyar
STAFF WRITER

SOMERS — The outpouring of support for the families that lost children and their homes in a fire on Quality Avenue Tuesday has been tremendous, officials say, and is proof of the level of care people have for their neighbors.

The Somers Strong signs that have been cropping up in the past few days speak to the closeness of the community
Community continues on 5

Medical examiner: Deaths of 4 children were accidental

By Christine Dempsey
STAFF WRITER

SOMERS — The deaths of four children in a fast-spreading fire in their home Tuesday night have been ruled accidents, according to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

The children, who ranged in age from 5 to 12, died of smoke inhalation and thermal injury, said Holly Cuomo, a medical examiner's office spokesperson.

Investigators are still working to confirm the children's
Accidental continues on 5



COMMUNITY

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and residents' efforts to best support the families who experienced such devastating losses. Before the fire was put out on Wednesday, residents of Somers and surrounding communities began posting messages of sympathy and offers to help.

Lynn Austin, who grew up in Somers and now lives in Morson, Massachusetts, said she learned about the fire on social media Wednesday morning and immediately thought about what she could do for the families.

"All anyone can do is try to help," she said Thursday while dropping off clothes and toiletries at Claudette's Consignment Shop on Vasalie Avenue, which set up a donation box for items for the affected families. Austin also brought non-upholstered furniture on Wednesday to the town transfer station on Egypt Road.

Austin used to work in the cafeteria at Somers Elementary School and said although she didn't know the children who died in the fire well, she remembers their faces. "Such a loss is unimaginable," she said. "This is an awesome community with so many people reaching out to help."

Many communities, not just Somers itself, are feeling the impact of the fire, Austin said. "Friends of mine in Massachusetts are heartbroken," she said.

Enfield resident Dechon Harris, the supervisor of the consignment shop, said when he heard on the news about the fire, he spoke with the shop owner, Cindy Ecobb, about starting a

collection of clothes to donate to the families. "I used to work as a patient care associate and medical assistant in a hospital," he said. "So I know quite a bit about seeing people in need."

So far, Harris said, the response has been "exceptional" and he is constantly getting calls from people asking what they can do to help. "I treat others as I want to be treated," he said, adding that he has seen that same spirit in many others in the past 24 hours.

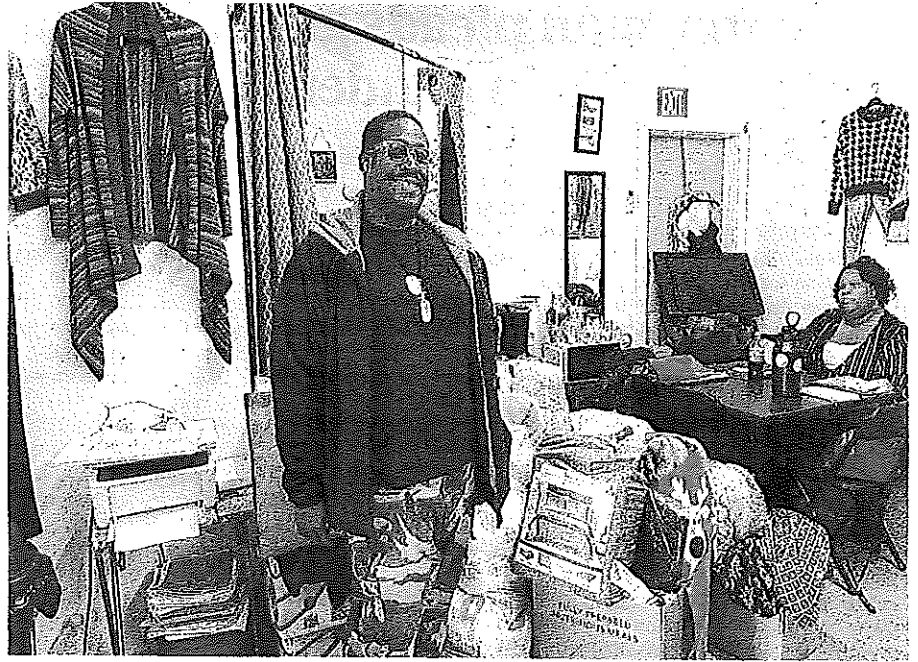
For the most part, Harris said, the shop is looking for clothing that is suitable for children and adults as well as toiletries but the staff is grateful for the toys, towels, linens, furniture, sports equipment, and dog food that has been donated. One family living in the Quality Avenue house lost a litter of puppies in the fire and a few of their adult dogs were still missing as of Thursday afternoon.

Mitch Harris, the campus director of New England Tractor Trailer Training School, donated a trailer to the consignment shop on Thursday. "Our goal is to fill it up with donations for the family," Ecobb said.

"We are people of God," Harris said. "And this is God's work."

Brittany Lynn of Somers organized a group of mothers of Somers Elementary School children and dropped off gift cards and furniture the families could use at the transfer station Thursday afternoon.

"This is an amazing community," she said. "The school district, administrators, and teachers have all been beyond amazing to assist us parents to help talk to our kids as well as keeping our children safe and loved



Susan Danseyar/Hearst Connecticut Media

Dechon Harris, supervisor of Claudette's Consignment Shop in Somers, has organized a donation box outside the store on Vasalie Street for people to leave clothing and household items for the families whose homes were destroyed in a fire on Tuesday.

during this difficult time of loss and sadness."

When you have such a small community, everyone knows everyone and helps by any means possible, Lynn said. "Don't be surprised if in a few days you see 'Somers Strong' signs and T-shirts all over the town."

Stafford resident Diana Norris said her family had a house fire a few months ago and hearing about the two families "reached out" to her heart. "We didn't lose people like this one family did; it was just things that we lost," she said. "I'm just getting my stuff together now and know how hard that is, let alone losing children."

Since hearing the news on Wednesday, Norris has dropped off towels and pajamas at Claudette's and bought gift cards for the family at stores such as Stop & Shop and Marshalls. She plans to also get Walmart gift cards so the families can buy household items "to get them through the next few months."

Norris said in tragedies such as this fire, families sorely need money. The Town of Somers has established fund to help the families. Monetary donations can be sent to the Somers Angel Fund, Town of Somers, 619 Main St., Somers, CT 06071. Donations can also be made online through the town's Recreation

and Leisure Services' portal.

Norris said she can't stop thinking about other ways to help the families. "I'm willing to use my truck if anyone needs help with deliveries," she said. "I'll volunteer for whatever is needed," she said.

Human Service Director Matt Cox, who used to work in Houston, said he's impressed with the community's generosity, which he said feels like it's as voluminous as the responses he witnessed in Texas to hurricanes. Somers, he said, is "a very close knit, very generous community. It's very nice to see the tremendous outpouring of caring and concern."

ACCIDENTAL

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identities, she said Thursday morning. Family members have identified them as Lukas, Genevieve, Benjamin and Archer.

All four attended Somers public schools, where counseling was taking place Thursday.

Three of the children's siblings were injured in the fire on Quality Avenue — one seriously. A 19-year-old had to jump out a window to escape the flames, Somers Fire Chief John Roache said.

A litter of puppies also was lost in the fire, Roache said.

The fire quickly spread through the 100-year-old house, and flames consumed

the stairway, making it difficult for firefighters to make rescues, Roache said.

Like other older houses, the duplex has the balloon-style construction that lacks fire stops and allows flames to spread from one floor to another in gaps behind walls, fire officials said.

The surviving family members

are "stably housed, and we are working with them to ascertain current and future needs," said Matt Cox, Somers human services director. "They are with people who care about them," he said. He declined to say where the family is staying.

The deaths have shaken the small town near the Massachusetts state line. As of the 2020 U.S.

Census, Somers had a population of 10,255.

First Selectman Timothy Keeney said the deaths of four children in a fire in town is "unprecedented."

"This is a small community, and everybody knows everybody else," Roache said.

Staff writer Jesse Leavenworth contributed to this report.

Officials: Rapid spread of fire prevented escape

By Peter Yankowski
STAFF WRITER

SOMERS — A rapidly spreading fire cut off residents' path of escape down a stairway, forcing one to jump from a second-floor window. A back entryway was blocked by flames, preventing firefighters from immediately getting inside. And the older home contained concealed areas that allowed the fire to move quickly and became difficult for firefighters to extinguish.

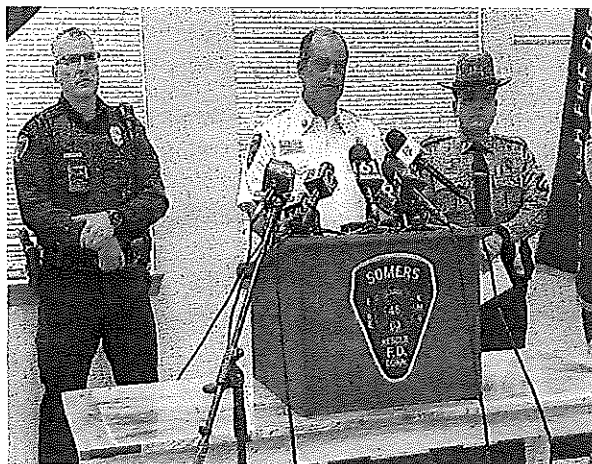
Those were factors officials cited in a deadly fire Tuesday night in Somers that left four children dead. All are believed to be under 12 and members of the same family, though their remains have not yet been officially identified.

A relative identified the four children between the ages of 5 and 12 by their first names in a GoFundMe to raise money for their funeral costs and the family's living expenses. They were named Lucas, Benjamin, Archer and Genevieve, the page's organizer, Jessica Marie, said in the fundraiser. She identified herself as a cousin.

"The news of the fire last night in Somers that took the lives of four young children is absolutely devastating," Gov. Ned Lamont said Wednesday in a post on X. "I am appreciative of the work of the first responders on the scene who provided aid during this emergency. My prayers are with their families and friends."

State and local authorities said around 10:20 p.m. Tuesday, fire crews were called to the duplex home on Quality Avenue in Somers, a town of about 10,000 that's a half-hour drive north of Hartford. At the scene, crews found the home "fully-engulfed" with flames, state police said. Three family members who escaped the flames told firefighters four others still remained inside.

Firefighters searching the home discovered two children



Susan Danseyar/Hearst Connecticut Media

Somers Fire Chief John Roache and state troopers provide an update Wednesday on a fire that killed four children.

inside the home, one of whom was pronounced dead at the scene, the town's fire chief said. The other was taken to Johnson Memorial Hospital where they also died from their injuries, he said.

Rescuers found two other children dead inside the home soon afterward, the fire chief said.

The state police Fire & Explosion Investigation Unit and Eastern District Major Crime Squad are investigating the cause and origin of the fire along with the local fire marshal's office. While authorities have not released an official cause of the fire, the agency said that "at this time, the fire does not appear criminal in nature."

'Egress almost impossible'

Investigators are now left sifting through the rubble, and are asking neighbors who may have taken photos or video of the fire to share them with state police in the hope of helping pinpoint what led to the fire.

During a news conference on Wednesday, officials pointed to several factors that may have contributed to the deaths.

The fire was able to rapidly spread from the first to the second floor, Somers Fire Chief

John Roache said, cutting off a stairway, "which made egress almost impossible for the people in the second floor."

Roache said one of the residents escaped by jumping out of a second-floor window.

Eight residents lived on that side of the duplex-style home, though only seven were present during the fire, Roache said. The three survivors who escaped, two children and one young adult, were injured, Roache said. One of them suffered serious burns.

Four people were present in the other side of the home, but were able to escape without injury, he said. A litter of puppies was also killed in the fire, and a firefighter sustained a burn injury, Roache said.

A back entranceway was "difficult" to get in and took "some extra effort," for firefighters to get inside, Roache said. He didn't elaborate on why, citing privacy concerns.

In an email Wednesday, Roache said two rescue crews "quickly attempted entry" through the rear entrance and the front door after learning of the missing occupants.

"A third search was initiated shortly after, with the assistance of an aerial ladder through a sec-

ond-floor window," he said.

Some of the neighbors in the area had gotten fire extinguishers and were trying to fight the flames when firefighters arrived, the chief said, but the "volume of fire" was too great.

'Balloon-frame' construction

The way the house was constructed may have also allowed the fire to grow quickly, the chief said. Roache said the home was built in the 1920s.

"The older construction contained numerous concealed spaces, which allowed the fire to spread rapidly and took considerable effort to extinguish," he said.

During Wednesday's news conference, the chief described the house as an older "balloon-frame" construction.

The style of construction is common in homes built before about the middle of the 20th century. During construction, the home's builders would frame studs — the vertical support structures inside the wall — that ran continuously from the top of the foundation to the roof, according to Alan Zygmunt, public information officer for the Connecticut Fire Academy.

"So basically, when you completely seal up the building, and now people are living in it, there is an air channel that runs from the basement level all the way to the attic space in an uninterrupted channel of air," Zygmunt said. "Once fire gets into that channel, it can run vertically through the building very very, very rapidly. And that usually leads to very fast fire spreads in those types of buildings."

Since about the 1970s, homes have instead been built with "platform" construction, where builders construct the next story of a home on top of the floor, Zygmunt said. The floor then serves as a "fire stop," interrupting the air channel running up the wall.

While renovations that open

up the walls could involve installing fire stops in a balloon-frame home, Zygmunt emphasized having an early warning system for fire safety.

"Have good smoke detectors, make sure that smoke detectors work and make sure that everybody knows what the plan is in the case of a smoke detector going off," he said. "Even in a balloon-frame construction building, if you exit immediately, and you get early warning, yeah, you can still exit the building and still get out safely."

Roache said smoke detectors were believed to have gone off, as some family members reported hearing them. "So we're still investigating that, but we believe that there may have been," he said.

So far, authorities have not suggested what may have caused the fire. During Wednesday's news conference, state police and Roache were asked repeatedly if a Christmas tree contributed to the blaze. But they said the cause remained unknown and the investigation was ongoing.

"The damage to the house was very significant, so for investigators to sift through that rubble, to sift through all that damage to find that exact origin and cause of the fire, is going to take some time," State Police Trooper First Class Pedro Muniz said.

He said he couldn't rule out if a Christmas tree was involved, but if it was, it would have been burned up.

Roache said some of the family members have not yet spoken with investigators due to their injuries.

"We haven't had an opportunity to really talk to the victims to get their statements as to exactly what's happened," Roache said. "So we want to give them a little bit of time before we barge in and start asking them a lot of questions, especially when some of them are younger."

"That's why this is going to take a little longer, he said.