

Blaze displaces complex residents

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NORRISTOWN - A five-alarm fire that sent sheets of flame and clouds of black smoke into the rainy sky last night destroyed at least 52 apartments and left homeless about 200 residents of the Korman Communities-Marshall Wood complex.

Because of a lack of fire stops and sprinklers in the three-story buildings, erected in the 1960s, a fire that began in one building's basement raced up utility ducts to the roof and then leaped to two adjacent roofs, Norristown Mayor Ted LeBlanc said.

The fire - which one Norristown firefighter said was the worst he had seen in 20 years - sent one man to the hospital with respiratory problems. A firefighter also was treated for smoke inhalation.

The toll could have been far worse but for the fact that the fire broke out shortly before 5 p.m. while many residents were still at work, Norristown Fire Marshal Charles R. Sweeney said.

"With more people in the building, it could have been a different story," he said.

As evening turned to night, more than 100 firefighters from Norristown and surrounding Montgomery County fire companies continued to battle the blaze at the 16-building, 360-unit complex, at West Marshall and Selma Streets in the city's residential west side.

The fire was still burning out of control last night.

It appeared to begin inside a wall between the utility room and the laundry room, then spread inside the walls.

Because the smoke was inside the walls, the building's smoke detectors did not set off an alarm until the fire was well under way, Sweeney said.

For some residents, it was all too close a call.

Stanley Bracey, 35, was on his way home from his job driving a bus in Philadelphia when his wife, Robin, called him on his cell phone.

He said she told him that flames started shooting down from the ceiling of their son's bedroom.

She grabbed the children, 13-year-old Stanley Jr. and 2-year-old Adia, and fled the building as quickly as she could.

"We lost everything. Everything is totally destroyed," said Bracey, in a shelter the Red Cross had set up at the Stewart Middle School.

M.J. Paschall, Korman Communities' regional director for properties, said she had no idea how many people were in the three-story dwellings when the fire broke out.

"We're calling each apartment for an accounting right now," she said in a phone interview from the scene.

One of those burned out of their apartments, 64-year-old Dorie Blackson, had just moved into the complex on Wednesday.

Blackson, one of about 90 evacuees in the cafeteria of the Stewart Middle School, lamented: "My furniture is gone. My dining room set is gone. My diamond rings are gone. I don't even know where I left my car. I don't know what I'm going to do."

For Lora Mokrejs, the experience was especially nightmarish because the reason she had moved into the complex a month ago was that her Reading home had been destroyed by fire.

Clutching her dog Midnight, a Rottweiler-German shepherd mix, Mokrejs, 39, said: "I was working late to do more paperwork for the insurance company [regarding the Reading fire], and I was driving home talking to my friend on the cell phone, and the friend said there's a fire in Norristown.

"I raced home, parked my car at the first spot I saw, and ran all the way to my apartment screaming, 'Midnight, Midnight, Midnight.'

"Fortunately, I found her, and we got out in time."

Wearing just a housedress and sweater, and holding her medicine and her cat, Ann Weller, 48, stood out in the rain and waited to see if the fire would spread to her building. "I'm scared," she said.

Some of those displaced will be taken to a Korman Suites residence in Blue Bell, and others will go to the Valley Forge Hilton hotel on West DeKalb Pike in Upper Merion.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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