

## **SAFE HAVE GUTTED: Staff and firefighters successfully evacuate 49 patients**

POCATELLO — The fire that destroyed the Safe Haven Care Center on the city's east side won't be fully extinguished until Sunday morning at the earliest, authorities said.

None of the Terry Street medical facility's 49 patients were injured in the fire, though several suffered from smoke inhalation while being evacuated from the burning building.

The Safe Haven Care Center was equipped with sprinklers, but fire officials said that none of them activated during the fire — not even the ones in the attic where the fire started.

Safe Haven reported that the large building's sprinkler system was inspected by the Pocatello Fire Department two months ago and did not have any problems, so it's unclear why the sprinklers did not work. But the Pocatello Fire Department would not confirm that it had conducted any recent inspections of the sprinkler system.

Pocatello firefighters and the six Safe Haven staff members on duty at the time of the fire are being credited with saving the lives of the patients by quickly evacuating all 49 of them after the fire ignited.

The blaze was reported at about 12:10 a.m. Saturday, and firefighters said they did not feel they had the fire under control until about 7 a.m. Saturday.

Still, as of Saturday afternoon, firefighters were continuing to spray the fire with water cannons because there were still dozens of pockets of flames burning within the ruined remains of the building.

Fire officials said they have not even started investigating the fire because what's left of the building is too dangerous to enter. Fire officials said that hopefully they will be able to begin the investigation on Monday and determine what caused the fire and why the sprinklers didn't work.

Authorities said the fire might have been sparked by a malfunctioning light fixture based on what the first Pocatello firefighters on the scene reported.

Safe Haven reported that the building was insured. The Pocatello care center, one of five Safe Haven Health Care facilities operated in Idaho, was a nursing home but it also provided 24-hour skilled nursing and psychiatric care.

The Pocatello Fire Department was notified of the fire when the flames triggered an alarm at the care center. The responding firefighters entered the building and smelled smoke but did not initially see any fire, fire officials said. The reason for this was that the fire was burning in the building's attic.

The evacuation of the building's patients began, and soon after, firefighters discovered the flames in the attic.

Firefighters said the fire got a big head start on them because they had to first help Safe Haven employees evacuate the patients, many of whom were bed-ridden.

By the time firefighters did engage the flames, the fire had spread throughout much of the attic and roof and was getting significant help from winds blowing through the area, fire officials said.

Many of Safe Haven's patients were on oxygen because of health problems and the many oxygen tanks in the building exploded as the fire spread, further fueling the blaze. Part of the reason why firefighters were not entering any part of the building on Saturday is that it's believed several unexploded oxygen tanks are still present in the smoldering ruins.

A Journal reporter who arrived at the scene around 1 a.m. Saturday reported that about half of the building was fully engulfed by the fire and the flames were about 20 feet high.

Firefighters quickly realized that attacking the fire from inside the building was too dangerous so they adopted a "surround and drown" strategy for combating the blaze — hitting the flames with water cannons from ladder trucks and other fire engines from the east, west and south sides. A small hill borders Safe Haven on its north side and firefighters armed with hoses doused the flames from that flank.

One other hazard for firefighters was the large blue decorative siding that hangs off the roof of Safe Haven on all sides of the building. Fire officials said these large panels were easily displaced by the fire and there were concerns that they would fall on the firefighters battling the blaze.

Several firefighters took the proactive step of tearing down many of these panels before they could hurt anyone.

The Chubbuck Fire Department was called in early Saturday morning to reinforce the Pocatello Fire Department at the scene and fire officials said about 50 firefighters were fighting the blaze at its peak.

No firefighters or Safe Haven staff members were injured by the fire.

Safe Haven's 49 patients were initially evacuated to the building's parking lot before being transported via city buses and Pocatello Fire Department ambulances to the nearby Portneuf Medical Center.

Several of the patients were initially suffering from smoke inhalation but PMC staff evaluated those individuals and determined that they were OK and did not require hospitalization.

PMC stated via a press release: "Our staff worked closely with the Safe Haven staff to care for their residents and make them comfortable with food and blankets while waiting for transportation to other facilities."

By Saturday afternoon, Safe Haven reported that all 49 of the patients had been transported to other care facilities, including Safe Haven centers in Bellevue and Wendell.

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**Staff Report**

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Safe Haven said it is working with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare to make sure all of the displaced patients are properly cared for. Safe Haven is also planning to set up collection points in the Pocatello area for people to drop off donations for the displaced patients.

“At this time, our primary concern and focus is on the health, safety and well-being of our residents,” said Scott Burpee, president and chief executive officer of Safe Haven Health Care. “I am deeply grateful for the hard work of our staff and fire departments ... for all of their efforts. We are working in partnership with surrounding communities and our other facilities to ensure ongoing care and housing for every one of our Pocatello residents.”

Safe Haven Health Care’s corporate offices are located on South Fifth Avenue in Pocatello.

When the fire began, PMC was put under what’s called a Code Black, which means no hospital staff could leave and additional medical personnel were called in because of a potential mass casualty incident.

But those additional PMC personnel who had been brought in were soon allowed to go home when it became apparent that none of the 49 displaced Safe Haven patients were injured.

Firefighters hit the fire with so much water Saturday that a stream flowed down Terry Street into the Idaho State University campus.

Pocatello Water Department personnel were called in to try to help keep any resulting flooding to a minimum.

There are no other buildings in close proximity to Safe Haven, so firefighters did not have to worry about the blaze spreading to adjacent structures.

Pocatello police shut down Terry Street in the area of Safe Haven because of the fire and it’s unclear when the road will be reopened.

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