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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Idaho State Journal

Pocatello, Idaho

Thursday Nov. 23, 2017

by Shelbie Harris

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Fire Department says Safe Haven fire not intentionally set

POCATELLO — Authorities investigating the fire that destroyed the Safe Haven Care Center have ruled out any malicious or intentional cause.

The destructive fire that ignited late Friday night did not result in any injuries, and in the blaze's aftermath there has been a huge outpouring of community support for the 49 displaced residents of the Terry Street facility that served as a nursing home and provided skilled nursing and psychiatric services.

Ever since it was discovered that Safe Haven's sprinkler system didn't activate during the fire, there have been questions about the blaze. The Pocatello Fire Department did its part to clear the air on Wednesday by issuing a lengthy press release about the fire.

One big question that has not yet been answered is what caused the blaze. But the Fire Department has ruled that it believes the fire was accidental in nature.

The Fire Department did explain why the Safe Haven Care Center's fire life safety systems — including the sprinkler system in the attic where the fire began — failed to activate.

"The fire alarm system did detect and alert occupants as designed, and the first notification of smoke was initiated to the Pocatello dispatch center by the alarm monitoring company," the Fire Department said in its statement. "Early in the investigation it was determined that the attic section of the fire sprinkler system had been abandoned per code prior to approximately 2007. Investigators were able to determine that the owners and contractors had sought and attained appropriate approvals to modify the fire sprinkler system in an approved manner."

In short, the attic had a sprinkler system but the correct permits had been approved years ago for it to not be in use.

The Fire Department said the rest of the building did have a working sprinkler system that was able to supply water as designed if a sprinkler head activated. However, the fire did not work its way down below the attic to trigger the sprinkler system before the roof collapsed and destroyed the system, the Fire Department said.

"As a point of explanation, the operating parts of the sprinkler system would have activated per design, up until the roof collapsed and destroyed parts of the system, had the fire been in the area they were present," according to the Fire Department. "The fire remained in the unprotected area of the attic for most of the duration of the blaze. In conclusion, there were no noted violations or deficiencies noted in the fire and life safety systems."

Fire Department investigators have not been able to determine an exact location of the fire's origin but have determined several areas of probability. While no exact cause has been determined, investigators have determined a high probability of the fire being electrical in cause.

“(Pocatello Fire Department) investigators will continue to work with the owner’s investigators to try and make a more determinate conclusion, but much time and study will be needed,” the Fire Department said.

According to the Fire Department’s incident report, the fire started around 11:55 p.m. Friday. That’s when the fire alarm system monitoring company notified the Fire Department that a fire was detected in the building.

Firefighters arrived to find light smoke in one of the building’s hallways. More fire units were requested to investigate the source of the smoke, which began to grow in volume.

The Fire Department battalion chief in charge of the response soon ordered a full evacuation of the building and Safe Haven Care Center staff and firefighters were able to safely evacuate all 49 patients from the burning structure.

The evacuated patients were transported via ambulances and city buses to Portneuf Medical Center where they were evaluated. Although some had suffered minor smoke inhalation, none required hospitalization, and they were all eventually transported to other facilities, including other Safe Haven care centers in Idaho.

By the time firefighters finished the evacuation and turned their attention to fighting the fire, they found the blaze had spread to the entire attic of the large building.

The fire had even penetrated the building’s roof and was being fueled by westerly winds, the Fire Department reported.

The fire eventually caused the roof to collapse, and in the end, the flames gutted the entire building. Firefighters remained at the scene extinguishing the fire the entire weekend and it was still smoldering on Monday.

The Fire Department estimates the blaze caused around \$2 million in damage counting the destroyed building and its contents.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare previously misstated that the now destroyed Safe Haven Care Center had been cited for staffing concerns relating to federal compliance certification.

“Staff and staff training certainly contribute to a facility’s ability to be in compliance with federal standards, but Safe Haven was not specifically cited for staffing or training of staff,” said Niki Forbing-Orr, public information manager for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

Safe Haven officials added that the Pocatello care center was not in the process of being shut down prior to the fire but the nursing home component of the facility was going to be transformed into an assisted living center.

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

Safe Haven President and Chief Executive Officer Scott Burpee said it’s too soon to discuss future plans for possibly rebuilding the Pocatello facility and how Safe Haven can best serve the community.

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Burpee said his staff has been working nonstop to accommodate and acclimate the residents from the Pocatello facility who have been transferred to other Safe Haven facilities so that their new living arrangements and care levels are the same as they had been.

In addition, Burpee pointed out that the outpouring of community support for the displaced residents has been tremendous.

Safe Haven officials are working with community partners to further facilitate donations of clothes, personal items and financial support for the residents.

“The good news is that 49 residents were safely evacuated from the facility early Saturday morning and are now adjusting and receiving quality care in other facilities,” Burpee said. “What’s unfortunate is that most of the residents’ personal belongings and property were left behind and destroyed by the fire. In recent days, several organizations have stepped up with donations to help replace some of these basic items and needs for our residents, but more help is certainly welcome.”

Burpee said he appreciates the donations already made by Deseret Industries and the American Red Cross.

Safe Haven is asking that sweat pants, jeans, T-shirts, blankets and bed linens for the displaced residents be dropped off at the Idaho State Veterans Home in Pocatello, at 1957 Alvin Ricken Drive. For a more detailed list of other items needed by the residents, visit the Safe Haven Facebook page at www.facebook.com/Safehavenhealthcare208/.

Safe Haven staff will deliver all of the donations to the relocated residents, Burpee said.

Safe Haven is also working with the First Baptist Church of Pocatello to handle any financial contributions the public wants to make on behalf of the displaced residents. The money donated will be used solely to replace items residents lost in the fire, Burpee said.

Donations can be made by visiting the First Baptist Church’s website: fbcpoky.ccbchurch.com/goto/giving.

Burpee reiterated his praise and gratitude to his staff and Fire Department personnel for the bravery and professionalism that was on display in evacuating all the residents during the fire. He also praised the physicians and nurses at the Portneuf Medical Center for the response and care provided to residents immediately after the evacuation.

“Let me be very clear in saying that this was a tremendous effort by so many to help our residents in a full-on emergency,” Burpee said. “Sometimes efforts like this get lost in the aftermath of tragedy. But at the end of the day, lives were saved because staff and emergency responders performed bravely and efficiently under extreme conditions.”

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