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8 Elderly Women Are Killed In Nashville Nursing Home Fire

An overnight fire in a four-story nursing home killed 8 residents today and critically injured about 20, the authorities said. The residential area of the building had no sprinkler system.

Among the victims was the 96-year-old mother of the district fire chief, Bobby Connelly, who responded to the fire, said Deputy Chief Kim Lawson.

Most of the 116 residents had to be carried out by firefighters or rolled to safety in wheelchairs because few patients could walk and the elevators were knocked out of service.

Some residents on upper floors were placed on backboards and carried down ladders. Others had oxygen tanks, and one was on a ventilator. The assistant fire chief, Lee Bergeron, said at least 25 residents were treated at hospitals for burns and smoke inhalation.

"This is like the worst-case scenario for any firefighter in the country, a nursing home fire," Deputy Chief Lawson said.

The victims, all women, ranged in age from 76 to 96.

The fire started late Thursday in a room on the second floor of the NHC Healthcare Center, an older building in a medical area on the edge of downtown, the authorities said.

The lone sprinkler in the building was over the kitchen grill, as required by law, said Gerald Coggin, a spokesman for National Healthcare, owner of the nursing home.

National building codes adopted in 1991 require sprinkler systems in the residential areas of nursing homes. But enforcement was up to the states, and Tennessee did not adopt the stricter standards until 1994.

Because the nursing home in Nashville was built with brick and steel in the mid-1960's, it was required to add sprinklers only if the company extensively renovated the building, said Diane Denton, spokeswoman for the State Health Department.

Assistant Chief Bergeron said the fire appeared to have started in a corner room on the second floor that was filled with smoke when firefighters arrived. The assistant chief said a panel of state and local authorities would try to determine the cause of the fire.

Asked whether sprinklers would have helped, Assistant Chief Bergeron said, "It definitely would have made a difference" in saving lives.

The evacuated residents were taken to an exterior terrace and a hospital across the street. It took firefighters about an hour to contain the blaze, and two additional hours to evacuate the building.

National Healthcare, which operates 87 long-term health care centers, mostly in Tennessee and elsewhere in the South, bought the building in 1976.