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FEEDBACK



Grow-op fire forces apartment evacuation

By Wanda Chow
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2006



MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

Six grow-ops discovered in 42-unit building, including three that were connected to each other

Kadryan Rahman is comforted outside her Metrotown area apartment building after a fire late Monday morning two doors down the hall from her suite sent residents scurrying onto neighbouring lawns.

A Burnaby apartment fire, likely caused by a marijuana grow operation, left about 60 people homeless Monday morning.

By the time the blaze was under control, grow ops had been discovered in six suites in the 42-unit building at 6630 Telford Avenue, a three-storey apartment building near Metrotown mall.

Burnaby RCMP Corp. Pierre Lemaitre said Tuesday morning that four search warrants were executed at the building, one involving three suites that had been connected by makeshift doorways. A total of 940 plants were seized, 583 of those coming from the suite where the fire occurred, with more likely lost in the blaze.

Lemaitre said there's "no doubt" the grow ops in all six suites were the work of the same culprits.

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On Tuesday, police were still working on tracking down those responsible.

The fire started at about 11:20 a.m. Monday in a third floor suite in the rear of the building.

Lara Amin, 20, was in the kitchen cooking with her mother at the time when someone knocked on the door of their third-floor suite. "I was so scared," she said between sobs in front of the building next door. "Smoke just came in so fast, it was like seconds."

Amin ran to the balcony and planned to jump but realized it was too high so she made a run for it, along with her mother and two brothers, down the smoke-filled hallway and stairs to safety.

Her 14-year-old friend, Lawin Rahim, was sleeping in her suite when she heard the fire alarm and her mother rushing in to tell her there was a fire. She grabbed her cell phone and ran. "All I could think about was just run outside."

Once out of the building, she looked up and saw the suite on fire. "The window was broken, everything was black, smoke was coming out," Rahim said, still clad in her pajamas.

There were no injuries although the situation could have been much worse. Assistant fire chief George Whitehurst said those types of apartment buildings were built in the late 1950s and early '60s and have no fire sprinklers. Like two similar buildings on nearby Dow Avenue which caught fire in recent months, sprinklers were not required when the structures were built.

While the fire was still under investigation Monday, Whitehurst said it was a "good bet" it was caused by the grow operation. Grow ops are not only fire hazards because of the overloaded electrical systems used, they create a risk of electrocution for firefighters responding.

About 30 firefighters and eight trucks were sent to fight the fire. The first crews on scene knocked down the main body of the fire then withdrew because of the electrocution risk, he said. Firefighters did not re-enter the suite and finish the job until a B.C. Hydro crew cut off power to the building.



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The fire even burned a hole in the floor of the suite, resulting in a hole in the ceiling of the unit below.

Reports that some people may have been trapped inside suites prompted firefighters to search the building, which is how they came upon the half dozen grow ops.

"It's more than I've ever seen in one place," Whitehurst said. "These types of things are getting more common. Firefighters are definitely aware of the fact when they go into any building fire they may have to deal with a [methamphetamine] lab or grow op."

While he had no damage estimates, Whitehurst said the fire was contained to the one suite but there was smoke damage throughout the third floor.

On Monday afternoon, Debbie Clyne, the City of Burnaby's emergency social services director, said she thought residents might be allowed back in their homes "within a few days." However, that would be up to city hall inspectors who still had to determine if the building was safe to occupy.

Of the 50 to 60 residents, only a couple had insurance, Clyne said. Insurance will cover their accommodations while those who are able will likely stay with family or friends. Those with nowhere else to go were to be put up at a local hotel for 72 hours under the city's emergency social services program.

Ironically, on Monday the balcony of the burned out suite still yielded one sign of what was inside - a blue and yellow watering can.