

UPDATE: INVESTIGATORS SAY HOME EXPLOSION THAT INJURED BECKLEY DOCTOR WAS ACCIDENTAL, DOCTOR IS DOING WELL

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BECKLEY, WV (WOAY/WSOC) - New details are being released after a deadly home explosion in North Carolina that injured a cardiologist from Beckley.

The Charlotte Fire Investigation Task Force has concluded the incident was accidental based upon the physical scene examination. Fire investigators determined the house was secured from the time the occupants left and returned from their vacation. A significant rise in natural gas use was identified for the residence beginning several days prior to July 2, 2019, indicating a leak occurring inside the structure. Based upon the known information, the residence was most likely saturated with natural gas which ignited within a few minutes of the occupants entering the residence. Fire investigators were unable to determine the specific cause or equipment involved in the leak nor could a specific ignition source be identified.

An outside investigation will continue through the insurance carriers and other specialty engineers who will conduct forensic testing and examination of equipment from the home. This process will most likely take many months and possibly longer for them to provide a more detailed analysis.

According to Todd Hatcher, "Dr Karam is physically doing well. He was released from the hospital 2



days after the event with no complications. He did not require any type of rehabilitation or physical therapy. He is overwhelmed by the emotional support and love he has received from his patients and the community. He does believe the lord has kept him on the earth for a reason and that is to continue to care for his family and his patients. He and I have maintained direct contact since he was released from the hospital via telephone and we have physically seen each other several times. I am seeing patients in the office through him with this guidance during his absence. He will return to the office soon hopefully by the end of the month. Thank you for the privacy you have given him during this time of grief."

BECKLEY, WV (WOAY) - Raleigh General Hospital releases statement after cardiologist is injured during a home explosion.

The statement reads: "We were deeply saddened to hear about this incident. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Karam family during this difficult time. Dr. Jebran Karam is a tremendous cardiologist, physician, and advocate for his patients. We wish him a full and fast recovery."

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (WSOC REPORTS) - Inspectors will return Wednesday morning to a home in Ballantyne, trying to figure out what caused an explosion that killed a woman and seriously injured a man.

The home was reduced to rubble after the exploding Tuesday afternoon.

A woman's body was recovered from the debris around 9 p.m. Tuesday, officials said. Police identified her as 58-year-old Rania Karam.

Dr. Jebran Karam, who is one of the owners of the home, was in the emergency room Tuesday night after being pulled from the pile of debris, the CEO of Raleigh General Hospital in Beckley, West Virginia told Channel 9 reporter Joe Bruno.

Jebran Karam was flown to a hospital with serious injuries. Firefighters said he was conscious and alert after the explosion and was able to call 911 to help rescue crews find him.

Jebran Karam is a prominent cardiologist in West Virginia. The CEO of the hospital where he works said Karam is a tremendous cardiologist, physician and advocate for his patients. Jebran Karam and his wife purchased the home in Ballantyne in 2015.

It is unclear what the relationship was between the two.

Officials said they began receiving numerous 911 calls about the explosion and fire just before 2 p.m., including one from Jebran Karam, who was trapped inside the house.

Firefighters got to the home along James Jack Lane off Ballantyne Commons Parkway within six



minutes.

Chopper 9 flew over the scene around 2 p.m. and could see flames and smoke rising from the debris pile. Wood and insulation were scattered at the site, and debris was blown into the adjacent street as well as into some surrounding trees and nearby yards.

Firefighters used a ladder truck to get closer to the flames that erupted from the explosion.

Jebran Karam, buried under the mountain of debris, was able to call 911, which helped first responders find him quickly and gave them details on where to find the Rania Karam.

Later in the day, fire officials said they were switching to a more technical and methodical search, which meant they were searching at a slower pace due to loose debris. After the Rania Karam's body was found, officials stopped their search.

Firefighters remained on scene overnight.

"The pressure was tremendous"

Debris from the explosion fell onto at least five nearby homes.

Neighbors and nearby businesses told Channel 9 they felt the ground shake and heard a large boom.

"I just went out for a walk. I put my Beats on, and I walked right by the house. I walked on, maybe two minutes, and through my Beats, I heard a boom!" neighbor Lorie Porter said. "Something told me to turn around and walk back, and I started turning around, and all the neighbors started to run out of their homes. And there's debris right where I had walked, and the house was just leveled."

Officials said several homes in the area were damaged and have been checked by firefighters.

"I felt the floor shake below, and I was nervous we were having an explosion," neighbor Sue Blackman said.

"I can't imagine being right next to it, how much you could feel it because the pressure was tremendous," neighbor Benjamin McNeill said.

MEDIC confirmed it sent multiple units to the scene, as well as its mass casualty bus.

Fire officials said other homes in the vicinity of the explosion were safe, but those homes nearby received significant damage. MEDIC said two people living in surrounding homes were being evaluated for injuries that weren't considered life-threatening.

"I was sitting on my back patio, and I heard the boom, saw everything shake," neighbor Stephan Custer said. "I actually thought it was my house exploding. I thought the house was going to collapse



and when I got far enough, I could see the plume of smoke across the street and I ran down there. I just saw it was totally obliterated."

More than 80 firefighters responded to the scene in the middle of a sweltering summer day.

"Hydration becomes an issue. We have the means to combat that. We have rehab resources here, providing water, plenty of shade. So now the challenge really becomes that our firefighters stay healthy as they continue to work," CFD Battalion Chief Matt Westover said.

Temperatures were in the upper 90s, and heat index values soared to 106 degrees Tuesday afternoon. Seven firefighters were treated on scene with IVs for dehydration and later returned to their duties.

One firefighter was taken to a hospital to be treated for dehydration, officials said.

Many people in the community came together to help the dozens of firefighters and other first responders on the scene by bringing boxes of pizza, coolers of water and Gatorade, and watermelon.

The cause of the explosion is unclear as the investigation continues, and officials with Piedmont Natural Gas and the Charlotte Fire Department said there is no timeline for when they will be able to determine exactly what happened.

The home was 6,300 square feet and worth more than \$1.2 million, according to the county's property appraisal.

Check back for updates on this developing story.