

Official: Space heater caused blaze that killed 4

By Gillian Flaccus
Associated Press

PORTLAND (AP) — A house fire in rural Oregon that killed four children and critically burned three other family members started with a portable space heater that was being used after a fireplace malfunctioned, a volunteer fire chief said Thursday.

Combustible materials placed too close to the heater ignited and started the blaze in the tiny timber town of Riddle, Fire Protection District Chief Rich Holloway said in a post on the district's Facebook page.

Holloway did not immediately return two calls but City Manager Kathy Wilson confirmed the authenticity of the Facebook post in a phone interview.

The fire killed four children ranging in age from 4 to 13, and devastated the tiny town with a population of fewer than 1,000 people.

A component of the fireplace that forces heated air back into the home malfunctioned several days before the blaze early Wednesday and the family was using the heater until they could get it repaired, Holloway wrote.

"All the burn pattern indicators, witness statements, and the statement from the father on first arrival, all collaborate," he said.

Community members held a candlelight vigil at a church late Wednesday that attracted more than 300 people.

Grief counselors were on hand at schools in the South Umpqua School District, where some of the children attended class, said Superintendent Tim Porter.

The three survivors were transported to Portland for treatment of critical burns.

James Keith Howell, 39, Tabitha Annette Howell, 38, and Andrew Hall-Young, 13, were in critical condition in the burn center, Julie Reed, a spokeswoman for Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland, confirmed on Thursday.

In a statement released through Legacy Emanuel, family members huddled at the survivors' bedside declined interview requests.

Killed were 4-year-old Gwendolyn Howell, 7-year-old Haley Maher, 10-year-old Isaiah Young and 13-year-old Nicholas Lowe.

Nicholas Lowe was a foster child, said Douglas County Deputy Dwes Hutson.

Tabitha Howell is the mother of the remaining children and is married to James Howell.

Howell is the father of the youngest victim and the stepfather of the two victims, ages 7 and 10, and the surviving 13-year-old.

SHELTER: Site for facility has moved to a new church

Continued from page 1

when the weather conditions meet a level of risk, determined by a combination of temperature, precipitation, wind speed, and ground surface. Guests can call the shelter information line at 541-636-7321 after 2 p.m. to see if the shelter will be open that night.

The shelter organizers also have established a Facebook page that everyone is encouraged to "like" and "follow." Stories of shelter happenings, current items needed, news of the guests, and a link to the sign-up site are available. The page is Sisters Cold Weather Shelter.

Community support for the shelter and its guests continues to be generous. Nourishing and tasty dinners and breakfasts are prepared by volunteers and brought to the shelter. The cooks, the guests, and the monitors all sit down to a family dinner to share stories and news of the day. If the food runs short, Martolli's has agreed to provide free pizza to be sure everyone gets enough to eat. Last Thursday, Rio Restaurant provided dinner of chicken verde, rice, beans, and salad.

Locals report that the greatest gift to everyone has been the breaking of stereotypes for all those involved — guests and volunteers. From different circumstances, with



PHOTO PROVIDED

The Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration will host the Sisters shelter through March.

a wide range of backgrounds, people have joined together to form a caring community of love and support (see commentary, page 16). Local businesses and private citizens have stepped up with food, supplies, and clothing. Local churches are providing the facilities.

Monitors share stories about guests who carry their head a little higher as they walk down the street. Physical health has improved — one resident has reportedly gained 15 badly needed pounds from the food provided.

James, one of the Shepherd House monitors who has experience working

in shelters from New York to Bend, told shelter volunteers that when people are treated with compassion, dignity, and respect, it can be life-changing. He said the Sisters shelter is doing an outstanding job.

"I've never seen anything like it," James said. "You are wrapping your arms around these people. It is amazing."

Monetary donations to the shelter can be made through Shepherd's House Ministries, which is processing donations earmarked for Sisters. That allows donors to make a tax-deductible donation, since Shepherd's House has 501(c)(3) nonprofit status and the Sisters shelter has not yet applied for that status.

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