

Carbon monoxide leak at Vt. ski chalet kills 1 sends 8 to hospital

Vermont State Police Lt. James Cruise, who was investigating the death of a 60-year-old man in a carbon monoxide incident that sent eight people to the hospital, carries air tanks from the Killington home on Friday. Investigators had to wear the tanks because of fumes in the house, Cruise said.

By Brent Curtis

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KILLINGTON – A carbon monoxide leak at a Killington ski chalet killed a Massachusetts man Friday morning and sent his wife and others to the hospital.

Edward N. Lappen, the 60-year-old Cohasset, Mass., man who owned the two-story vacation home at 445 Richardson Road, was pronounced dead at Rutland Regional Medical Center.

Lappen's wife, Helene Lieb, was taken by helicopter to Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, where a state police investigator said she was placed inside a hyperbaric chamber to remove the poisonous gas from her system.

A spokeswoman at the hospital said Friday evening that Lieb was in good condition.

Firefighters and rescue crews were called to the home — reachable only by narrow dirt roads that climb back for miles from Route 4 — just before 5 a.m. by a woman inside the home who awoke feeling ill.

“She awoke and alerted the rest of the family,” State Police Lt. Jim Cruise said.

Police didn't release the woman's name or the identities of the other people in the home. Seven of the eight survivors were released from the hospital in Rutland early Friday afternoon.

They returned to the chalet where they gathered their belongings before driving back to Massachusetts. A woman with the group said the family members and friends who were at the home were not prepared to make a statement.

Cruise said investigators believe a propane wall heater unit in the basement was the source of the carbon monoxide leak.

“The heater was tested and found to have multiple cracks,” he said, adding that high levels of carbon monoxide were detected emanating from the unit.

The fumes overcame Lappen and his wife, whose sleeping quarters were closest to the unit, Cruise said. The gas had the potential to kill the other occupants if the leak had gone undetected much longer, he added.

“Carbon monoxide can kill you in a matter of hours,” Cruise said.

While the chalet was outfitted with smoke detectors, it lacked carbon monoxide detectors. Many modern alarms detect both smoke and carbon monoxide.

The fatal incident was a shock to next-door neighbors Jay and Barbara Richardson, who have known Lappen and his family for years.

“They would have been up for the ball drop tonight,” Jay Richardson said. “We've never seen anything like this. We're absolutely astounded and sick.”

The couple said Lappen, his wife and their guests arrived at the chalet Tuesday and had experienced no ill effects leading up to Friday.

The chalet's occupants included Lappen, his wife, two family members and five friends of the family, they said. There were no young children inside the home.

The Richardsons said they are related to the woman who awoke and alerted the others.

“She's not a sound sleeper,” Barbara Richardson said. “She woke up feeling sick and realized something was wrong. It's a miracle. If Peggy hadn't woken up I don't know what would have happened.”

She declined to give Peggy's full name or the names of the other people staying at the chalet.

The risk of carbon monoxide poisoning increases during the winter months when heating units are in use and homes are made more airtight to keep the cold out.

Installation of a carbon monoxide detector greatly decreases the risk of poisoning.

Early signs of exposure to the gas includes headaches, dizziness, disorientation, nausea and fatigue. Anyone exposed to the gas should call 911 for assistance.

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