

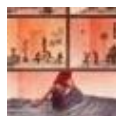
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Community holds vigil to remember Lowell fire victims

By **Oliver Ortega** and **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 10, 2014



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LOWELL — Some kneeled behind the Buddhist monks and prayed. Others stood in respectful silence. A few people watched from their front yards and porches.

On Thursday evening, more than 300 mourners came to honor the seven people who died in the state's deadliest fire in two decades. They stood across the street from the burnt-out, three-story apartment building ravaged by the blaze and participated in a traditional Cambodian Buddhist mourning ritual.

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The fire sent shock waves of sorrow across this old mill town, but they landed most powerfully in Lowell's burgeoning Cambodian community, because among the dead was a family of five of Cambodian descent. Several at the vigil said they knew the family and others who had managed to escape.

“He brought his children to the same school as me,” Roeun Sao said of Torn Sak, the father of five who died along with their mother and three of the children. “He was at my house just this week.”

Calling the fire a terrible tragedy, Mayor Rodney M. Elliott said at the vigil that survivors had been relocated to hotels and that officials will continue to meet with them and provide help.

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More than 50 people were left homeless.

“The city is here with every resource possible, the State Police, the state fire marshal,” he said in English while a translator relayed the information in Cambodian. “We will provide services to each and every family affected by the fire.”

The vigil was organized by the city’s Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association. Seven monks, wearing traditional orange robes, came from three nearby Buddhist temples to lead the prayer.

Their heads bowed, the monks steered a procession from the front of Pailin Plaza, a shopping complex about ¼ mile from the scene of the fire. The Plaza, home to many Cambodian business owners, is in the heart of what the city has designated Cambodia Town.

Association chairwoman Bopha Malone described the Cambodian community as close-knit and said that “whether we know them personally or not, we’re basically a part of this.”

“It’s a mourning tragedy and we’re all saddened by the situation,” she said. “A lot of families have been affected by this. Basically, [the vigil] is a way to give respect to these families.”

Officials at the Cambodian organization had been working since early Thursday to help coordinate support for those affected by the fire, said Voop de Vulpillieres, deputy director of the association. Aid efforts include free



Lowell apartment fire kills seven

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translation services for families who lost their home, she said. The organization is also helping with a relief fund that city officials set up through the Jeanne D'arc Credit Union.

“We want to ensure that the victims and the victims’ families and all of the people around them are well supported and taken care of,” Vulpillieres said.

Cambodians account for more than one-fourth of Lowell’s foreign-born population, more than immigrants from any other country, according to data from the US Census Bureau’s 2008-2012 American Community Survey.

About 13,400 people in Lowell, nearly 13 percent of the city’s population, identify as either born in Cambodia or of Cambodian descent, according to the data.

Vulpillieres said officials at the Cambodian association estimate about 30,000 people in Lowell are of Cambodian descent, but thousands are not accounted for in official data because they are reluctant to fill out Census forms.

Several people said that while they did not personally know anyone affected, they felt compelled to participate in the ceremony.

Metrey Keo, an immigration lawyer who emigrated from Cambodia several years ago, said the day’s tragedy left him struggling for words.

“We’re all pretty much speechless,” he said. “I feel like I lost a family member.”



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Monks from Glory Buddhist Temple led people from the scene of a deadly fire in Lowell.

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