

Fire forces nearly 40 people from nine residences near school

By John Zucal Managing Editor, Orange Transcript

The scene along a stretch of Oakwood Avenue was one of devastation Sunday, one day after a fire damaged or destroyed nine adjacent residences.

According to a spokesman with the Orange Fire Department, the blaze began at about 1 p.m. inside a 2 1/2-story residence along Oakwood Avenue. It began spreading to neighboring homes until the fire had reached nine buildings.

Seven firefighters were injured while battling the blaze, said Fire fighter Derrick Brown, coordinator for the department's Community Relations Division. None have returned to duty as of Tuesday afternoon.

The multi-house fire forced approximately 40 people from the homes. Kalisha Morgan, principal of nearby Oakwood Avenue School, said eight students were among the displaced residents.

"Our counselor, Pamela Venable, has reached out to the families," said Morgan, who added counseling was made available to all of Oakwood's students. She noted some of the students live across the street from the fire area.

The school's staff also has begun the process of helping the displaced students, said Morgan.

"The teachers have donated uniforms as well as bookbags and educational materials," said Morgan. "The staff and students also plan a collection for the displaced students at a later date."

Morgan said all this was occurring because the school's staff and students would do all they could to help the students and families who lost their homes in their greatest time of need.

Inside fire headquarters, the department has been working to help the displaced residents through the early stages of their recovery, said Brown. The fire staff's efforts have been supplemented by help from local chapters of the American Red Cross as well as the Love of Jesus and St. Matthew AME churches.

Art Samaras, director of emergency response for the Red Cross's Northern New Jersey chapter in Fairfield, said five families, which accounted for 23 of the displaced residents, were housed in hotel rooms in East Orange. He noted his volunteers worked with the fire department and the city's Office of Emergency Management to coordinate assistance efforts.

"We provide what we deem to be immediate needs for up to 72 hours, such as financial assistance for food, clothing, a hotel room," said Samaras. "After that we provide them with referrals to other agencies for help."

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. arrived at the fire scene while fire fighters were battling the blaze.

"My first concern was if everyone got out," said Hawkins. "We're counting the blessings because the firefighters made sure no lives were lost."

Meanwhile, Brown said the Red Cross and churches have collected and distributed donations of clothing and food.

"We've had a great outpouring of assistance. We've just been channeling the resources to the families," said Brown. "As we learn of resources, we get in contact with them."

Hawkins said the Health Department has been asked to check city records to help residents begin the process of getting new identification items, such as birth certificates and Social Security cards. He noted that because of security issues during the past decade, additional forms of identification have been required to receive driver's licenses.

Brown said learning the fire's cause will be difficult as much of the residence where the fire originated was destroyed.