

Fatal fire at retirement centre



Residents forced from the R.J. Brooks Living Centre because of a fire March 15 are happy to be returning March 17. / SUBMITTED

By Sarah Sobanski

An elderly woman was found dead in a fire at R.J. Brooks Living Centre.

Bancroft OPP said the fire broke out around 4 a.m. Thursday morning, March 15.

Residents were evacuated to the Bancroft Bible Chapel, next to the centre on Hastings Street North.

As of March 20, North Hastings Fire Service fire chief Pat Hoover said the cause of the fire was still being investigated. The woman's name hadn't been released. Bancroft OPP, Bancroft Fire Department, Ontario Fire Marshal's Office and the Office of the Chief Coroner are assisting with the investigation.

Hastings Quinte Paramedic Services and Hastings County Community and Human Services Bancroft were at the chapel Thursday to assist residents evacuated from the building.

A registration desk had been set up in the front room of the chapel. Residents were being escorted back to the centre to get essential items such as morning medications.

Chief of county paramedics and director of emergency services Doug Socha said residents were in "positive spirits considering they were woken up in the middle of the night."

Hoover said the fire was confined to a unit on the second floor but work needed to return people in a "safe and secure" manner could take time.

He said as the building had already been evacuated "residents were staying with family and friends or in spaces found through Hastings County services" it was best to attend to repairs then, "instead of working around people."

Around 4 p.m. Saturday afternoon, March 17, residents from 28 units on floors one, three and four were allowed to return to the building.

"Residents are glad to be returning to their homes," Hoover said Saturday. "[This is] a positive first step forward in the recovery from the Thursday morning fire."

Seven more units would be accessible March 23 and the final four April 3.

"We've set fairly realistic timelines to have [necessary safety tasks] completed. We've aimed a little higher, but that way if it happens early well then it's great but we don't want to promise [residents] something and not be able to deliver," he said.

When asked if residents needed anything the day of the fire, Hoover said everything was pretty much looked after.

"There's been a great outpouring of food for the residents at the church here today" all kinds of offers at the church that have come in here as well. We can't say enough about our community and how they step up and help out in a time like this."

Case supervisor for human services Bancroft Andra Kauffeldt confirmed residents were still in good shape March 20.

"It reminded me why I do this work," Kauffeldt said of what she saw Thursday. She said "complete strangers were walking in"

offering their spare bedrooms and businesses stepped up as well.

?There were a lot of good, positive, human moments,? she said.

According to the fire service, it evacuated each of the centre's 40 units, which contained 48 occupants.

UPDATE: This story has been updated to reflect the combination of updates and full story following the fire that ran in the March 23 issue of Bancroft This Week.