

Two firefighters injured in 4-alarm San Bernardino blaze



A firefighter cools off some hot spots from a four-alarm fire along the 700 block of Seventh Street in San Bernardino Sunday. The fire displaced dozens of people from an apartment complex. Gabriel Luis Acosta - Staff Photographer

By [Joe Nelson](#), San Bernardino Sun

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Jessica Gonzales, 26, looks towards her home that was burned in a four-alarm fire along the 700 block of Seventh Street in San Bernardino Sunday. Gabriel Luis Acosta - Staff Photographer

SAN BERNARDINO >> Two firefighters were injured and several residents displaced Sunday in a 4-alarm fire at a vacant duplex that neighbors say was a refuge for squatters.

Roughly 80 firefighters responded to the blaze in the 700 block of Seventh Street, west of G Street, at 4:19 p.m.

“There was heavy fire and smoke when we got here, with multiple explosions,” fire Battalion Chief Nathan Cooke said.

He could not immediately say what caused explosions during the blaze, as that was still being investigated.

Among the agencies that assisted the San Bernardino Fire Department were the Rialto, Redlands and San Manuel fire departments.

The fire spread west to a federally subsidized apartment complex and east to a four-plex. Both structures sustained moderate to major damage, Cooke said.

It was unclear just how many people were displaced. That information was being gathered, Cooke said.

One firefighter suffered minor injuries, was treated and released on scene.

Another firefighter suffered a “traumatic injury” and was taken to a hospital for treatment and observation, Cooke said.

The cause of the fire was under investigation by the arson unit, Cooke said.

Fire engines lined Seventh Street between G and H streets late Sunday afternoon.

The stench of smoke permeated the air across downtown San Bernardino.

Residents lined curbs, some clutching their children, as firefighters stood atop their engines or beside the blazing structure, dousing it with water.

Jessica Gonzales, who lives in the four-plex next door to where the fire occurred, said she was alerted to the fire by a woman’s screams.

“I heard a woman yelling, ‘I’m going to burn this ... (expletive) down,’” said Gonzales, 26. “I came out and saw that the house was already on fire.”

In a panic, Gonzales said she grabbed her three daughters, ages 8, 7, and 6, and ran out the back door, leaving behind all her personal items including her purse and mobile phone. She said the fire spread to her home, which sustained extensive damage.

“I believe all my stuff is gone,” Gonzales said.

She doesn’t know what she’s going to do.

“All my family lives in Seattle, Washington,” Gonzales said.

Neighbors say the vacant structure that burned to the ground had long been a den for squatters. They say they’ve complained to city code enforcement many times, but the problem persisted.

“Prostitutes, pimps, people selling dope — all day 24-7,” said Cheryl Boyd, 60, who lives across the street. “They chase them away. They come right back.”

About a month ago, 24-year-old Chastity Salazar, who lives in the neighboring apartment complex, said squatters lit a fire inside the vacant structure and had a barbecue.

Just last week, they lit a bonfire outside the structure, she said.

“They just put blankets up and made it their home,” Salazar said. “We had to shoo them out.”

She said police and code enforcement have flushed squatters from the structure several times, but the squatters keep returning.

“If they took care of this when they should have, none of this would have happened,” said Chastity’s mother, Barbara Salazar.

<http://www.sbsun.com/general-news/20130818/two-firefighters-injured-in-4-alarm-san-bernardino-blaze>