

North York Neighborhood Evacuated After Suicidal Woman Releases Toxic Chemicals

By Kathryn Blaze Carlson, National Post
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Toronto police evacuated part of a North York neighbourhood after a suicidal woman released a toxic chemical compound into the air, causing her own death and threatening the safety of families in roughly 50 nearby homes and a local secondary school.

The unidentified woman, reportedly in her mid-50s, called police around 10:15 Sunday morning threatening to take her own life by way of a hazardous chemical cocktail, which police believe to be hydrogen sulfide, a colorless and highly toxic gas that was allegedly formed by the combination of two otherwise harmless household substances.

When police services and the fire department arrived at the home at 95 Empress Ave., officers smelled a chemical odor of rotten eggs, prompting what would turn out to be a protocol evacuation of 100-metre area on a sunny Mother's Day morning.

"Our initial response was an evacuation, believing there may be a potentially deadly gas in the air," said Capt. Adrian Ratushniak, of Toronto Fire Services, adding that chemicals were, indeed, later found in the home. "We were aware that there could be a danger to other people in the area."

While exposure to lower concentrations of hydrogen sulfide can result in eye irritation, a sore throat, or headache, inhaling high concentrations of the chemical compound can cause suffocation and death.

And so, unbeknownst to Paul Ripley, an Empress Avenue resident who lives within the initial evacuation perimeter and slept through the incident, hazmat crews cautiously entered the home and found that the woman, alone, had already passed on.

Clad in head-to-toe rubberized and fully encapsulated grey suits, self-contained breathing masks, gloves, and neon orange boots, the officers removed the woman from the home and later began an investigation into what, exactly, caused her death.

"We took an abundance of caution because we have to figure out what the chemical was," said Inspector Randy Carter, watching on as hazmat officers went to and fro the home, which was surrounded by roughly ten fire trucks and another ten police cars, around 2:30 p.m. Sunday.

"There's a lot of training that goes into preparing for this sort of event, and today, that training became a reality," he said, adding that no emergency services officers nor neighbours have since reported being affected by the chemical release. By 3:00 p.m., neither the body nor the chemicals had been moved offsite out of an abundance of caution.

Through the course of the morning and early afternoon, eleven police cars, some carrying Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear response team members, and roughly nine fire trucks, were dispatched to the home which was blocked off by yellow police tape, according to Toronto police and fire services.

Still, much of the neighborhood outside the evacuation zone appeared largely unfazed, as garage sales, afternoon strolls, and bush-pruning continued as usual over the backdrop of chirping birds and lawn-mowers. Nearby, a red HazMat Rehab truck was stocked with NutriGrain bars, Gatorade sports drinks, and bottles of water, to keep the crew hydrated and nourished as it scoured the scene, according to one man managing the truck.

Meanwhile, officers knocked on an estimated 50 doors in a bid to clear the area and ensure public safety. At nearby Earl Haig Secondary School, more than 50 people were evacuated from the gym, which had been rented out for recreational basketball.

L.C. Lee, who lives across from the scene and slightly west, said he was shocked to be greeted at the door at around 10:30 a.m. by a police officer asking him to leave his home immediately. "He didn't tell me why, just that I should take what I need and leave as soon as possible," said Mr. Lee, after returning to his home around 2 p.m. "I just took my keys, my wallet, some money, and my phone. I had to leave my dog," he said, adding that he and his wife spent the nearly four hours wandering the neighborhood and watching as the scene unfolded.

Although Mr. Lee and others did, indeed, leave the area, a police-ordered bus scheduled to transport evacuees was cancelled due to a lack of demand, said Insp. Carter. "We're not going to drag people out of their homes kicking and screaming," he said, adding that it was up to residents to decide whether or not to evacuate.

Though by early afternoon the evacuation area had been slimmed down to the short block of Empress Avenue between Kenneth Avenue and halfway to the next street over at Dudley Avenue and encompassed less than half a dozen homes, and despite the fact that there was no longer a threat to the public, the immediate area was abuzz with shock and speculation.

"It scares me to think I was asleep in my house the whole time this was going on," said Mr. Ripley, over a noise that sounded much like a vacuum cleaner coming from the nearby cordoned-off scene. "I had no idea. I'm totally surprised that this has happened."

Indeed, Staff Sgt. Mike Stones, of Toronto Police Services, said he cannot remember the last time something like this happened in Toronto. "This is certainly a rarity," he said.

Source: <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/toronto/archive/2009/05/10/north-york-neighborhood-evacuated-after-suicidal-woman-releases-toxic-chemicals.aspx>