

At least seven missing after fire in Old Montreal building; father says daughter, 18, among the victims

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Investigators and firefighters are shown at the scene following a fire in Old Montreal, March 18, 2023, that gutted the heritage building.

GRAHAM HUGHES/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Smoke lingered in the air outside a heritage building where a fire broke out earlier this week, as a small crowd stood behind police tape watching firefighters at work.

Across the street, a makeshift memorial dedicated to the victims of the fire slowly grew as residents stopped by to drop bouquets of flowers.

“Rest in peace my beautiful Charlie,” read a note left with pictures of a young woman. “You are in our hearts forever.”

Montreal fire officials said Saturday evening that at least seven people remained unaccounted for in the fire that also injured nine others and destroyed the three-storey building in the city’s historic district on Thursday.

Initial reports said one person was missing after the blaze, but fire officials said information they received on Saturday suggested that number was higher.

“The information confirmed in the last few hours, from various sources, allows us to believe that there may be victims inside the debris,” Montreal fire operations chief Martin Guilbault said Saturday.

Guilbault told reporters that the building will be slowly taken down “stone by stone,” starting Sunday morning.

Police have not released the name of those missing, but Louis-Philippe Lacroix said his 18-year-old daughter, Charlie, was one of the victims trapped inside the Old Montreal building that housed an architectural firm and several residences.

Mr. Lacroix said his daughter was in an Airbnb with friends Thursday morning when the fire broke out. She and at least one friend made two calls to 911, he said, describing how they were trapped in a windowless apartment and could not escape.

“Learning this news and having to announce it to my son and my loved ones is certainly the worst thing to experience as a parent,” Mr. Lacroix posted on social media. On Saturday, he came from Terrebonne, a suburb north of the city, with other family members to grieve for his daughter outside the building where she spent her last night.

Fire officials said two of the nine people injured in the fire suffered serious burns and remain in hospital. During the evacuation, six people had to be rescued from the building by ladder.

Police have said the cause of the fire remains unknown, and the investigation is being led by the Montreal police arson squad.

“The stories of the people on site here that are missing are just horrible,” said Alain Vaillancourt, a City of Montreal councillor responsible for public security. He said it was too early to draw conclusions about potential safety issues with the building. If there were any violations, he said, the city would act severely.

On Saturday, the firefighters were unable to enter the building, which was deemed unsafe.

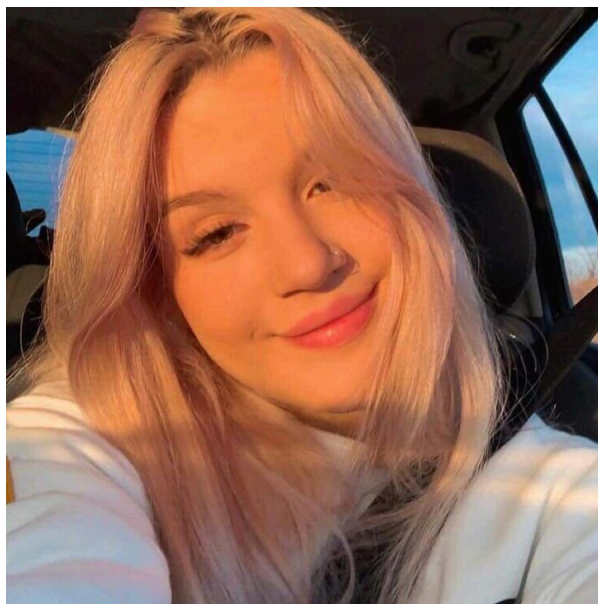
Police said there was some confusion over how many people were inside the building at the time of the fire because several apartments were Airbnb rentals.

Short-time rentals are not authorized in this part of the city unless it is the occasional rental of one’s principal residence.

The building is owned by Émile-Haim Benamor, according to the provincial land registry. Calls and e-mails to a man by that name went unanswered on Saturday.

Mr. Vaillancourt called on the province’s revenue agency to provide more resources to fight against illegal Airbnbs and other short-term rentals. He said the provincial agency has the power to impose heftier fines, while the city does not have enough inspectors to enforce the by-laws.

He said the city is also in touch with the Ministry of Culture so that everything would be done to save the William-Watson-Ogilvie building, which was built in 1890 and



Charlie Lacroix, 18, is unaccounted for after a massive fire at historic building in Old Montreal.

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has a neo-Romanesque medieval character. However, he said, “the priority right now is to make sure that the building is secure, that the walls don’t fall because they still have to go and find potential victims inside.”

“It’s sad,” local resident André Rival said of the fire victims as he walked by the building, looking at the charred debris. It’s also “sad for the heritage to go away like that,” he added.

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