

<http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Candle-flame-blamed-as-cause-of-West-Oakland-fire-11040236.php>

Long gap in fire inspections at site of deadly Oakland blaze

By [J.K. Dineen](#)

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While announcing that this week's deadly blaze at a West Oakland halfway house was accidentally ignited by a candle, city officials released records Thursday that suggest three or more years passed between fire inspections of the building — reviews that are required annually under state law.

A city spokeswoman, [Karen Boyd](#), confirmed that an unattended candle was the suspected culprit in Monday's fire on San Pablo Avenue that killed four people and displaced more than 80, but did not release further information about the investigation, saying a report will be completed soon.

Meanwhile, the city [Fire Department](#) released a list of inspections at the property dating to 2007. However, the documents were muddled and incomplete — and officials, after releasing them in the evening, did not explain them or respond to questions about them.

Previously, the city revealed that the building had failed an inspection last Friday, three days before the fire, because of a raft of problems including a lack of smoke detectors and fire extinguishers and a fire sprinkler system that needed servicing. The owner, who was in the middle of an ugly eviction fight with the nonprofit halfway house operator and its clients, was given 30 days to address the violations. He has not responded to requests for comment.



Photo: Jim Stone, Special To The Chronicle

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Firefighters work to put out a residential structure fire at 26th and San Pablo avenues in Oakland on Monday.

The new records say the three-story building at 2551 San Pablo Ave. was “compliant” in five fire inspection from 2007 to June 2012, and that inspectors made contact with the property in November 2014 and September 2015. But there is no evidence in the records that the building was fully inspected and cleared in the last two cases.

According to the records, the 2014 inspection was done after a nonprofit aid group applied to use a 400-square-foot room in the building as a “warming center” for up to 20 people.

The group paid a \$158 fee for the inspection, and the building was added to a list of places that homeless people could go to get out of the cold. But the records do not say the rest of the building was deemed safe.

Then, in September 2015, someone referred the property to the Fire Department, but there are no records indicating that an inspection found the building to be compliant with city codes.

One entry in the list of inspections indicates that a resident had complained about malfunctioning smoke detectors and “smoke fires in the kitchen.” But the entry is undated, and there’s no information about whether the Fire Department took action.

Erica Terry Derryck, a spokeswoman for Mayor **Libby Schaaf**, said late Thursday, “We are trying to release information as we get it in real time, but we don’t completely know yet what records exist or don’t exist.”

A Fire Department source familiar with the records said there appeared to be gaps, despite the state mandate for yearly inspections. “The bottom line is they did not do annual inspections,” said the source.

But the source cautioned about blaming inspectors, saying that department staffing “is not adequate for the number of inspections they are supposed to do ... these people are working their asses off, and there are not enough people to get the job done.”

Oakland is under pressure to ensure large buildings are safe in the aftermath of December's Ghost Ship fire, which killed 36 people attending an unsanctioned music event in an unpermitted live-work warehouse.

The Ghost Ship — which was a maze of electrical cords, makeshift stairs and funky sleeping quarters — was never given a fire inspection in recent years, with officials saying it had been listed as vacant.

Monday's fire was reported at 5:30 a.m. Among the four people who died, two have been identified: **Edwarn Anderson**, 64, and **Cassandra Robertson**, 50.

The building has been owned since 1991 by **Mead Avenue Housing Associates**, which is run by **Keith Joon Kim**, a Piedmont entrepreneur with a colorful and controversial past. He was once owner and chief executive of the now-defunct Granny Goose potato chip company, but later filed for bankruptcy and was convicted of lying to the Securities and Exchange Commission amid a probe into insider trading.

In 2012, Kim's building was rented by **Urojas Community Services**, a nonprofit founded in 1996 by the Rev. **Jasper Lowery**. It offered transitional housing and services including mental health and addiction counseling. It has received at least \$25,000 in public funding but has not filed nonprofit tax disclosures since 2010.

Before the fire, Kim was seeking to evict Urojas and its clients for failing to pay rent, but Urojas refused to leave, and City Councilwoman **Lynette Gibson McElhaney**, who represents West Oakland, was acting as a mediator in the fight.

McElhaney said she had hoped to improve the conditions in the building while heading off evictions. She said she didn't recall what led her to get involved and that she didn't notice major fire-safety problems during a tour of the property. The building recently came to the attention of fire inspectors, city officials said, when an engine company referred the property to them after a Feb. 25 service call. Inspectors did not immediately review the structure because, they said, they couldn't reach the landlord to get the required permission.

On March 18, fire inspectors got another referral, city officials said, which resulted in last week's visit and the discovery of a litany of urgent safety hazards.

While the city could have legally cleared the building, Schaaf said in an interview that the problems did not warrant more severe action because “they did not amount to an imminent life safety threat.”

Records released earlier by the city’s building department show a history of complaints about conditions at the building. Twenty code enforcement complaints were lodged in the past 10 years over leaky pipes, holes in the walls, rodents and lack of heat. Most of the problems were addressed by the property owner, city officials said, though seven complaints remained open.

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