

# Deadly explosion in northwest Baltimore neighborhood injures dozens

By Nick Barrickman  
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A massive blast in northwest Baltimore leveled row homes Monday morning in a residential area in what is a suspected gas explosion. The impact of the blast, which struck just before 10 a.m. local time, leveled three adjacent homes and severely damaged a fourth. An unnamed woman was pronounced dead and at least six others have been severely injured and are undergoing treatment in area hospitals.

The regional gas and electrical authority has ordered energy sources shut off to contain any further damage. Firefighters and first responders have been forced to sift through debris for survivors and belongings without the aid of heavy machinery.

“It was catastrophic. It was like a bomb, like you watch things in other countries where they have bombings and things like that. It was like watching that in real life,” stated local resident Dean Jones to reporters. “Telephone poles split, I mean, houses down the block, broken glass. When I initially got there, I could hear a voice just saying ‘Help,’ it’s crazy. It’s something I don’t ever wanna see ever again; I don’t want to relive it ever again.”

Multiple news sources reported young children and the elderly buried beneath rubble and debris. “I didn’t think, someone’s in there,” Jones said. “So we went and we just started digging. We started calling out, ‘Is anybody in here? If you’re in here, can you say something so we know that you’re here. Once they said it was a kid in there, I lost it. I got to get in here now. I just felt like, hey, what if it was me? I’m not a hero, I’m a human.”

Kevin Matthews, a neighborhood resident and building inspector for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), reported being knocked across his bedroom by the blast. Upon arriving at the scene, Matthews told the *Baltimore Sun* that he

heard “shouting from children trapped: ‘Come get us! We’re stuck!’”

Area residents have provided an outpouring of support to the victims of the explosion. Caravans of goods, including bottled water to help with overheating in the early August sun, have been donated and stockpiled at the nearby shopping center. Counselors are at the scene to provide assistance for emotional trauma and area officials are looking into securing overnight housing for those who have lost their homes.

Officials for Baltimore Gas and Electric (BGE) have remained mute about the potential cause of the blast. A public statement released on Monday said that the source of the explosion was “currently unknown” and that gas and electricity for the neighborhood had been turned off. Once search and rescue efforts have been concluded, the corporation would work with the local fire department in order to determine the source of the explosion. “Customer-owned appliances and piping will also be investigated,” it said.

With air conditioning cut off alongside electricity, many residents have been reported wandering outside in the neighborhood.

BGE, the oldest utility company in the United States, supplies natural gas to the 680,000-person metropolitan Baltimore area as well as its outlying counties comprising nearly 1 million homes. It is a subsidiary of the Exelon Corporation, a top-grossing energy conglomerate that makes nearly \$3 billion a year in profits. While the ultimate cause of the blast is still unclear, the gas piping system in Baltimore, as with other major industrial cities, is exceedingly outmoded and crisis-prone.

According to testimony taken earlier this year before the Maryland Public Service Commission and reported by the trade publication *Engineering News-Record*, “a

BGE executive estimated that one-third of the utility's gas distribution mains, one-quarter of its gas services and half of its transmission mains are more than 50 years old, with 15 percent of its gas distribution system made of 'outmoded' materials."

Gas leaks have crept up in recent times, with the *Sun* reporting in 2019 that the number of gas leaks BGE reported grew from 5,500 in 2009 to a peak of 9,600 reported leaks in 2016. In 2017 and 2018 reported gas leaks were at more than 8,000. In 2013, the company introduced a pipeline improvement program which is geared to remove and replace old piping.

Commenting on this program, the *Sun* wrote, "In the Baltimore area, BGE needs to replace thousands of miles of obsolete pipes that already could be leaking. Though hundreds of workers are assigned to the task, at the rate BGE is going, the work will take at least two decades."

Utilities currently charge individual customers cents on the dollar monthly to raise funds for new pipelines. BGE was able to spend \$139 million on upgrades in 2018 through this method, a small fraction of its profits.

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