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Omaha firefighter dies after roof collapses

OMAHA — A firefighter died Tuesday after he was trapped under a roof collapse in a four-alarm fire.

Arson is suspected, and police homicide detectives were at the fire scene, a Family Dollar discount store adjacent to a pawn shop in a residential neighborhood in the northeast part of the city.

The victim, a 43-year-old captain, was to be identified after all of his relatives had been contacted, said battalion chief Don Nichols.

"Several firefighters from his unit have headed to the hospital to be with his family," said Nichols.

At the hospital, a few weeping, soot-covered firefighters hugged each other as they tried to make some sense of the tragedy.

Nichols said the victim was leading his unit about a half-hour after the first alarm, taking a water hose into the blazing Family Dollar store when the roof collapsed on him. He was inside for some time before others pulled him out, Nichols said.

"The firefighters that were on the

line managed to get him and pull him out," Fire Chief Tom Graeve said.

A fire department spokesman said the victim was wearing full protective gear. Dr. Joseph Stothert at University Hospital said the firefighter suffered severe smoke inhalation and burns. He had been taken to University Hospital in critical condition.

The fire was declared under control shortly after 7:30 p.m. CDT, about 2 1/2 hours after it broke out.

It was the first time since 1989 that an Omaha firefighter died in the line of duty, fire officials said, and the 51st death of a firefighter in the line of duty in the city's history.

Graeve said arson was suspected in the fire that broke out just after 5 p.m. in the Family Dollar store and spread to the adjacent Four Aces pawn shop.

"We're going to be here all night," said Nichols. "Firefighters are basically containing the fire to the building at this time."

Mayor Hal Daub was out of town, but an aide, John Packett, was at the

fire scene.

"We're treating this as a crime scene," said Packett.

Before the fire was under control, thick smoke rolled over the neighborhood and wind-whipped ashes and hot debris showered down around houses. Firefighters walked up and down streets and through yards, making sure other fires did not break out.

Hundreds of spectators lined streets around the fire, with heavy smoke covering a nearly six-block area. Firefighters had to keep them away from the fire and firefighting equipment.

About 60 to 65 firefighters were at the scene at the height of the blaze, along with Omaha police officers, who were called in the help control the crowd and traffic.

There was no immediate word whether the fire was connected to a spate of arson fires that had residents of a separate Omaha neighborhood on edge. People living in the Dundee neighborhood were meeting Tuesday night to talk about the incidents.

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Dole's worries focus on reuniting GOP party

Bob Dole won Pennsylvania's presidential primary Tuesday but it was of little solace to a campaign trying to cure an internal Republican funk that has exposed doubts about the nominee and the GOP's broader election strategy.

Dole clinched the GOP nomination by winning 25 consecutive primaries in March, leaving little drama for Pennsylvania — or the 11 presidential contests still to come. Any chance for fireworks in Pennsylvania ended with Pat Buchanan's decision not to campaign there, even though he remains an active candidate.

Pennsylvania's 73 GOP convention delegates officially run uncommitted to any candidate, but many were Dole backers and most, if not all, were expected to back him at the August GOP convention. Dole entered the day with 1,202 delegates, well beyond the 996 needed to clinch nomination.

Early returns showed Dole handily beating Buchanan. President Clinton, who long ago clinched renomination, had no major opposition and coasted in the Democratic primary.

So predictable were the results that Dole didn't even stage a primary night celebration, instead thanking Pennsylvania Republicans in a statement that ignored recent turmoil in the Republican ranks over Dole's skills as a candidate and the party's strategy for dealing with aggressive congressional Demo-

crats. "You showed that the Republican Party is unified, it is focused and it is ready to take its message of positive, conservative change directly to the American people," Dole said.

That upbeat assessment ran counter to this evaluation of the Republican mood from a senior Dole adviser: "It's ugly out there."

Indeed, it was House Speaker Newt Gingrich who went so far as to use the term "funk" — a word President Clinton offered not too long ago when he was trying to explain his own political troubles.

"We are going through a Republican period of being in a funk," Gingrich said Monday night. But Gingrich reminded his audience that if big early leads always held up, the 1988 election would have produced President Dukakis.

Still, there is no disputing that Dole and his party have had a rough stretch.

For starters, Dole's early clinching of the Republican nomination hasn't translated into momentum: Recent national polls show Clinton with as much as an 18-point lead over Dole in a head-to-head matchup, and a comfortable lead in a three-way race with Ross Perot.

Surveys also show persistent doubts about the Republican Congress and high negative ratings for Gingrich, whom Democrats try to link to Dole at every opportunity.

Term-limits amendment declared dead

WASHINGTON — Popular with the public, a proposed constitutional amendment to place term limits on members of Congress died Tuesday in a Senate Democratic filibuster. Republicans sought political advantage in the aftermath.

On a 58-42 vote, two short of the 60 needed, lawmakers refused to stop debate on the measure. A short time later, Majority Leader Bob Dole pulled it from the floor.

"We'll bring it up again next year if need be," Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., said shortly before the vote. Elected to the Senate in 1994, Thompson led the fight for the measure, which enjoys support in the 70 percent range in public opinion polls.

All 53 Republicans and five Democrats voted to curtail debate on the proposal. All the votes against were cast by Democrats.

Term limits advocates outside Congress had long wanted a vote, the better to target candidates for the next few election cycles.

Said Paul Jacob, head of U.S. Term Limits, "I think those people who voted no ... are going to find that if they're up for election this year, this was not a very good vote for them."

The measure would have limited senators to two six-year terms and House members to six two-year terms, effective on the amendment's ratification by the required three-fourths of the state legislatures.

Daily Nebraskan

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<http://www.unl.edu/DailyNeb/>
FAX NUMBER 472-1761

The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during summer sessions. Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by phoning 472-1763 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The public also has access to the Publications Board. For information, contact Tim Hedegaard, 436-9253, 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Subscription price is \$50 for one year. Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448. Second-class postage paid at Lincoln, NE.

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