



legal brief

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Propane service manager convicted after home explosion

THE MANAGER WILL SOON FACE SENTENCING FOR INVOLUNTARY MANSLAUGHTER

On July 21, a Virginia jury convicted a service manager of a local propane company of involuntary manslaughter, a felony, and three additional misdemeanors related to the improper handling of hazardous materials. He is facing up to 13 years in prison.

The incident that led to this criminal conviction occurred on Feb. 16, 2024, at a private residence in Sterling, Virginia. The homeowner had an underground 500-gallon propane tank that serviced a heated pool. There were no gas-fed appliances in the home.

It is alleged in a civil lawsuit that the tank had been red-tagged prior to Feb. 16, 2024, the date of the explosion. It is claimed that the propane delivery driver did not know the tank had been red-tagged and put approximately 125-130 gallons of propane into the tank. He immediately began to smell a strong odor associated with a propane leak.

It is alleged that the propane company performed a leak check of the tank sometime prior to Feb. 16, 2024, and found a leak, meaning the tank was unsafe to use until the leak was fixed. The company disconnected the gas line to the tank and put a POL lock on the tank.

There had been a prearranged meeting between the homeowner and the propane company set for Feb. 22, 2024.

On Feb. 16, 2024, the delivery driver arrived to fill the home's tank. At the home, the driver smelled gas and asked the homeowner if she had any issues with her gas system. She was confused that someone was there early, so she called the propane company. A manager at the company told the homeowner it was all good, saying: "We fill it up to troubleshoot it for next week." She was told a technician was on the way to investigate the gas smell. And she was told, "You're not smelling propane; you're smelling the chemical to let you know it is leaking." She was told everything was fine.

When the service technician arrived later that day, he inspected the system and confirmed the tank was leaking. The tank was still unhooked from the gas line and still had a POL lock. He did not check inside the home for gas. In response to a question from the homeowner, he said he could not dig up the tank because it was not an emergency. The team that could remove the tank had already gone home for the day, and the earliest he could have a team there to dig up the tank was three days later.

He did not tell her to leave the home. He did not tell her not to light anything. She asked if she should call the fire department. She was advised not to do so.

She was told that she would lose all of her propane as it leaked into the ground from the leaking tank. He is quoted as saying: "We'll just let it ease out into the ground; we'll all be on our merry way. Unfortunately, you're going

to lose 129 gallons of gas; that's the sad part."

A 911 call came into the local fire department from the home next door reporting a propane gas odor. Within 18 minutes of receiving that call, the fire department had located the leak at the underground tank. At the direction of the fire department, she called the service technician who had been out to the home earlier. The fire department described the serious nature of the leak to the tech. The tech responded, "Respectfully, sir, I know you're doing your job, but I have been doing this for a long time, and I do not feel it is an emergency." It appears he did not come to the scene.

The fire department then set out to investigate the location of the leak and evacuate people from the home. Roughly 30 minutes following the call with the tech, the house exploded. A fireman died, another 12 firefighters were injured, the homeowner and her tenant were injured, the home was leveled and several surrounding homes were damaged or destroyed.

Plaintiffs are seeking \$100 million in this case. Firefighters generally cannot sue for injuries they receive responding to emergencies unless it is alleged that the conduct is willful, wanton or represents gross negligence. It is alleged these acts constitute just that.

The moral here: All reported leaks need to be taken seriously. **LPG**

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Former propane worker charged in Virginia house blast that killed a firefighter



Officials say a former employee of a propane supplier has been charged in the death of a volunteer firefighter who died while responding to a house explosion in Virginia

STERLING, Va. -- A former employee of a propane supplier has been charged in the death of a volunteer firefighter who died while responding to a [house explosion in Virginia](#) in February, officials said Tuesday.

Roger Bentley was indicted Monday on charges of involuntary manslaughter and unlawful release of hazardous materials, Loudoun County Fire and Rescue said in a statement.

Bentley also was charged with failure to maintain required records of an unauthorized discharge of hazardous materials, and unlawful failure to control or mitigate the unauthorized discharge of hazardous materials.

Online court records did not show if Bentley had a lawyer to speak on his behalf about the charges Tuesday.

The house explosion in Sterling led to the death of volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown, significant injuries to 11 first responders and \$2.5 million in damages, Loudoun County officials said. Brown was married with three children and had been with the county firefighting services since 2016, officials said.

Firefighters arrived at the home in the Washington, D.C., suburb to investigate a report about a gas smell, officials said. They discovered a 500-gallon underground propane tank with a leak on the side of the residence, officials said.

Shortly after they arrived, the house exploded and burst into flames, with multiple mayday calls coming from the firefighters trapped inside. Crews rushed in to try to rescue them from the debris that covered them.

Two people inside the house were escorted out before the explosion and suffered minor injuries from the blast.

Investigators determined that the explosion was caused by the leak, the fire department's statement said. Uncontained propane migrated into and around the structure and was ignited by something that hasn't been identified, the statement said.

Bentley is a former employee of Southern States Cooperative, Inc.-Leesburg-Fairfax Petroleum Service. In a statement provided to [WTOP-TV](#), the company said it is fully cooperating with investigations into the explosion.

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