Most W.Va. Gas Line Explosion Lawsuits Settled

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — The companies that own a gas pipeline that exploded near Charleston in December have settled all but one of the lawsuits filed by residents who were impacted by the blast.

Settlements recently were reached in six of the seven lawsuits filed last month against NiSource, subsidiary Columbia Gas Transmission and individual employees, Bobby Warner, an attorney who represents the residents, told media outlets Tuesday.

Details of the settlements are confidential, but Warner said the plaintiffs were "pleased with the results."

The Dec. 11 explosion and blaze destroyed houses, sent flames shooting nearly 100 feet into the air on both sides of Interstate 77 and melted asphalt and guardrails on the highway. No one was killed or seriously injured.

The blast occurred on a 20-inch-diameter natural gas transmission line segment that was installed in 1967, according to a preliminary National Transportation Safety Board report.

NiSource didn't immediately comment Tuesday. Columbia said last month that it had settled with and provided compensation to more than 40 families impacted by the explosion. It also stressed that the company took immediate action after the blast to ensure that basic essentials like housing and food were met for those who were affected.

"As we have since the moment this incident occurred, we are committed to working with those families in a fair and reasonable manner," the company said in the statement.

One resident, Margaret Johnson, refused to settle and will proceed with her lawsuit after attempts to mediate failed, Warner said.

She claims she was injured in the blast and that she has been unable to sell her home.

"She was actually present at the scene," Warner said. "She witnessed what happened and she's had to continue to live in that house."

According to the lawsuit, Johnson was sitting in her home when the explosion occurred. She ran from her home soon after hearing a loud boom, barefoot and in her pajamas "fearing that she would be killed if she remained in the home," the lawsuit states.

Johnson blistered her feet because of the heat from the blast and injured her hand trying to escape in her car, the lawsuit claims.

Johnson's lawsuit, like those that were settled, claims she suffered mental anguish, anxiety, humiliation, fear and stress, among other things.

Plaintiffs in the lawsuits that were settled are Tina White, Darell Sigmon, Lorie Estep, Dorma Harrison, Shelby McMillion, and Amy McMillion and her two minor children.

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