

Governor Phil Murphy

Press Pool Coverage: Governor Murphy Visits Passaic Firefighters

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PASSAIC — Gov. Phil Murphy visited the Eastside Firehouse in Passaic on Monday to commend firefighters for their heroism during Saturday's harrowing chemical plant fire. (<https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/passaic/passaic-city/2022/01/14/passaic-nj-downtown-fire-chemical-plant/6534555001/>)

Pizzas from Romeo's in Passaic were brought in, as firefighters huddled near Murphy to receive his thanks.

"The heroism and bravery of each of these folks just takes your breath away," said Murphy.

The 11-alarm blaze at Majestic Industries and the Qualco chemical plant on Passaic Street was contained through the efforts of about 200 firefighters from some 100 neighboring towns. The fire raged from Friday night through Saturday. Fire departments in New York City were also on standby, Murphy said.

The herculean effort from the state's fire departments prevented what could have been a devastating chemical disaster. The Qualco plant, which makes pool treatment supplies, stored as much as 3 million pounds of potentially hazardous substances on an average day, according to state data.

About 100,000 pounds of chlorine was burned up in the blaze. The three-story, 300-by-400-foot brick building that stored plastics, pallets and chlorine was reduced to a shell. But, the fire never reached the main building where most of the chemicals are stored.

"They never let go, they never let up," said Passaic Fire Chief Patrick Trentacost. By the time firefighters got there, the fire was well advanced, he said. "They knew they would have to dig in and be there for a while."

The situation was worsened by frigid temperatures below 20 degrees. With the prospect of a chemical explosion looming, firefighters used flares to keep hydrants from freezing and struggled with iced-over equipment. Icy caverns were formed in the building as firefighters sent arcs of water at the blaze.

One firefighter was sent to the hospital due to a facial laceration and several slipped on the ice causing twisted ankles and bruises, but Trentacost confirmed everyone is safe and doing well.

"It certainly was challenging, but it's not anything we're not familiar with in the city of Passaic," he said.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation, though Murphy said Trentacost does not believe that the fire was started by chemicals. "It's too early to speculate," said Trentacost.

Passaic is home to plenty of old factories. Saturday's blaze was reminiscent of a massive fire that destroyed the Atlantic Coast Fibers recycling plant on Jan. 30 last year.

Murphy noted during his visit to the firehouse that New Jersey has safety codes to protect older factories that are at a higher risk of catching fire, like Majestic Industries and the Qualco chemical plant.

"A lot of the codes we have in place as a state, as a country, are a result of experiences — even challenging and tough ones like this — that we had to live through and learn from," Murphy said. "I suspect there will be some of that here."

Trentacost and Murphy praised the command system used to coordinate with other fire departments throughout the state to get enough boots on the ground to control the fire. "We practice [the command system]," Trentacost said. "It's our bible."

Trentacost said there were 48 engines from all over North Jersey, 29 ladder companies, rescue trucks and EMS vehicles on hand. "We activated a lot of resources," he said.

Fortunately, all the area's fire departments were open. Several weeks ago about 40 firefighters were out with COVID-19, said Trentacost. When they got the call on Friday evening, some firefighters were still out sick.

Even with reduced staffs, the department was able to quickly pull together enough supplies and manpower to fight the flames.

"We expose ourselves to the elements. Fire, smoke, cold – that includes COVID now," said Trentacost.

Passaic Mayor Hector Lora joined Murphy and fire officials at the informal lunch and added his voice to thank the firefighters.

"We owe them a debt beyond anything my words can express," said Lora, who was at the scene of the fire for about 30 hours. "We owe them this city."

After firefighters had their fill of pizza, Murphy visited the site of the blaze to see the ruin firsthand.

"It's pretty incredible, pretty impressive," he said. "From the individual heroism to the scale of the response."

Rebecca King
NorthJersey.com

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