

Pair burned in encampment fire under St. Patrick Bridge



Ottawa Fire Services. Photo/Ottawa Fire Services

By Mike Lacasse , CityNews Everywhere

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Two people, a man and a woman, suffered from burn injuries during an encampment fire in Lowertown over the weekend.

Ottawa Fire Service (OFS) said they received multiple 9-1-1 calls about black smoke coming from under the west side of the St. Patrick Bridge at around 2:25 p.m. on Saturday.

Firefighters could see the dark smoke from a structure fire under the bridge on their way to the scene and found two injured civilians with burns when they arrived.

Fire crews assessed their injuries and found out that the man got out first and only suffered from minor burns on his lower back. The woman was trapped under blankets in the burning shelter and suffered second degree burns on her back, legs, hands and face before escaping.

OFS had to call in a second crew to help deal with the fire as high winds and multiple propane tanks were found venting flames. The second crew, which came from the north side of the bridge, said that it was almost impossible to see thanks to the smoke.

The pair's shelter — made from box spring mattresses and tarps — as well as their cooking equipment, heating equipment, bikes, blankets and several propane tanks were all destroyed.

It took firefighters 15 minutes to knock down the blaze and search the area for any other victims.

No other injuries were reported and a fire investigator was dispatched to the scene.

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Stéphanie Plante, councillor for Rideau-Vanier

Despite the fact that the city has a policy that no one has to sleep out in the cold, some people choose to encamp anyways, said Stéphanie Plante, councillor for Rideau-Vanier.

"There's a variety of reasons. Shelters are unsafe, their stuff gets stolen, they might have a dog or spouse that can't come with them," Plante said.

She said one of the things the city needs to focus on to help deal with Ottawa's growing homeless population and cut down on encampments, is to work on ways to permanently house people.

"I'm literally staring at [an empty government building] right now, and I'm like 'we could be putting people in there' if we just do what we call a soft conversion," Plante said. "People don't need granite countertops. They need a door, a bathroom and some privacy."

"There has to be a way that we can get more people on board and not just look at it like it's a downtown problem — because it's not."

Encampment fires a growing issue in the city

OFS public information officer Nick DeFazio said they've noticed an uptick in the number of encampment fires in 2023 compared to previous years.

Just last Wednesday, two out of five tents within an encampment were engulfed in flames near Terminal and Riverside when firefighters arrived to put it out.

Nobody was present at the time and no injuries were reported.

DeFazio added that the OFS has begun tracking encampment fires since December 8, 2023 to keep an eye on the troubling trend.