

ConEd Paying East Harlem Explosion Victims

Nearly 90 Survivors and Residents Displaced by Blast Have Received Compensation

By YONI BASHAN

March 19, 2014 10:34 p.m. ET



Crews used heavy equipment to move debris after two buildings were demolished March 12 in a gas explosion on Park Avenue and 116th Street in East Harlem. Eight people died and dozens were injured. *for The Wall Street Journal*

Nearly 90 survivors and residents displaced by the fatal East Harlem explosion and building collapses have received compensation payments from Consolidated Edison Inc., the company said Wednesday.

ConEd officials confirmed that payments were being made one day after federal investigators said they found a leak in the gas main that was "adjacent" to 1646 Park Ave., which was leveled along with 1644 Park. Ave.

No official cause for the blast and collapses, which killed eight and injured dozens, has been determined.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating and said soil samples taken near the site tested for high levels of natural gas.

So far, ConEd has made 87 payments to victims who were injured or lost their homes, said spokesman Robert McGee.

Mr. McGee declined to provide the total amount the company has paid or the average amount paid for each victim. The company made the payments after "one-on-one" meetings with victims, he said.



Attendees departed following the funeral service for George Amadeo, who was one of the people killed in last week's gas explosion in Harlem. *Kevin Hagen for The Wall Street Journal*

"We've been working with the city, the Salvation Army, and the Red Cross, and we've been meeting with those affected one-on-one to help them and their families with expenses, while also respecting their privacy," Mr. McGee said.

The company operates the natural-gas pipeline on Park Avenue between East 116th and East 117th streets. The pipe dates to 1887.

Pipeline operators are required by federal law to have a management system in place to check the integrity of their equipment and conduct routine risk assessments on aging pipes, NTSB member Robert Sumwalt said Friday.

Douglas H. Wigdor, whose law firm Wigdor LLP has handled cases against ConEd, said the

decision to start paying victims was unusual.

"It's certainly not standard practice, especially at this stage of the game," Mr. Wigdor said.

Payments made this early were likely being done to stem potential lawsuits from victims, Mr. Wigdor said.

Also, he said, any money paid to a victim now would likely be taken into account if that victim took later legal action against ConEd and was awarded damages.

At least one lawsuit—against the city of New York—has been filed in relation to the incident, according to lawyer Robert Vilensky.



Jose Cecilio Hernandez, husband of Rosaura Barrios Vazquez, 43, and father of Rosaura Hernandez Barrios, 21, arrives at a funeral home Wednesday. *Reuters*

His client, Jose Vargas, claims in a suit asking for \$10 million that he was on a bus at the time of the explosion and was injured, Mr. Vilensky said.

The office of Mayor Bill de Blasio said ConEd's payments were separate from the city's relief plan and fundraising drive.

There is about \$250,000 in the fund—some of the money was contributed by ConEd—that will be used to help pay for funeral expenses, rents, lost home furnishings and transportation, City Hall officials said. Those who have been displaced will be set up with short- to long-term housing as needed, city officials have said.

Wigdor LLP represented 21-year-old Gregory McCullough in 2007 after he was severely burned by a

steam pipe that exploded under East 41st Street and Lexington Avenue.

Also in 2007, Mr. Wigdor represented Ramgopal Oza, whose wife, Kunta Oza, died as a result of a gas explosion in Sunnyside, Queens.

The ConEd payments came as three of the eight people who died in the blast were remembered in separate services on Wednesday.

One service was held for George Amadeo, 44, at St. Paul Church on East 117th Street.

Mr. Amadeo died in the blast with his cocker spaniel, Blackie.

Another service was held for Rosaura Barrios-Hernandez, 44, and her daughter, Rosaura Hernandez, 21, who both lived at 1644 Park Ave.

Their husband and father, Cecilio Hernandez, was escorted to the service on East 116th Street in a police vehicle with his 4-year-old daughter, who survived because she wasn't home when the blast occurred.

His son, Oscar, remains in critical but stable condition in Harlem Hospital Center after his body was pulled from the rubble by a police officer minutes after the explosion.

Bianca Rivera, 20, who went to school with Rosaura Hernandez, broke into tears as she remembered her friend.

"She was always so kind," Ms Rivera said.

"I was delayed in graduation and she helped me and told me to not give up on it and I didn't, and I thank her for that," Ms. Rivera said.

Mr. Hernandez was too distraught to speak as he made his way inside the funeral home.

Write to Yoni Bashan at Yoni.Bashan@wsj.com
