

Flags Lowered After Blaze Kills 9 Firefighters

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Worst Firefighting Loss Since 9/11

CHARLESTON, S.C. -- South Carolina's governor has ordered state flags lowered to half-staff in honor of the nine firefighters who died in a fire at a furniture warehouse in Charleston.

The tragedy is the deadliest incident for firefighters in the United States since Sept. 11, 2001, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

The cause of the fire is under investigation, but Charleston's mayor said arson is not suspected. Mayor Joe Riley said the blaze apparently started in a storage area. He wasn't sure whether there were sprinklers in the building.

Riley said Tuesday morning the firefighters were "tragically and heroically lost" at the Sofa Super Store warehouse, and said the loss was "difficult to fathom or quantify."

"Nine brave, heroic, courageous firefighters of the city of Charleston have perished fighting fire in a most courageous and fearless manner, carrying out their duties," Riley said at a morning news conference. "To all of their loved ones, our heart goes out to them."

Overnight, firefighters saluted as the bodies of their colleagues were taken from the warehouse.

"This is a profession that we must never take for granted," the mayor said. "There's a fire raging and they go toward it."

Riley said the county coroner planned to disclose the names of the dead.

Gov. Mark Sanford, R-SC, asked the people of South Carolina to join him in prayer for the firefighters and their families.

"What happened in Charleston last night is an all-too tragic reminder of the danger faced by firefighters and other men and women in uniform as they put themselves in harm's way each and every day to keep the rest of us safe," Sanford said in a statement Tuesday morning.

"These are truly some of South Carolina's bravest, who in this case made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. I'd ask each and every South Carolinian to join me, Jenny and the boys in keeping these nine families in our thoughts and prayers in the difficult weeks and months ahead."

Office of State Fire Marshal

Flags are flying at half mast at the S.C. Firefighters Memorial on the grounds of the S.C. Fire Academy.

The fire started about 6:30 p.m. Monday. A number of firefighters were inside when the roof collapsed a short time later. Witnesses said when the store's roof collapsed it sent debris over about two dozen rescue workers. Spectators were hit with flying ash.

"It was like a 30-foot tornado of flames," said Mark Hilton, who was struck in his eye.

Riley said all of the store's employees escaped, but at least one worker was taken to the hospital.

A salesman at a nearby car dealership said he saw firefighters rescue four people from the building. He said "they were struggling" and looked "scared out of their minds."

There is no word yet on the cause of the fire.

The department has 237 firefighters in 19 companies located throughout the city.

- The Associated Press