

## A Troubled Past and Tragic Fire

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The devastating fire at Gabriel House in Fall River on 13 July 2025, which claimed nine lives, has cast a harsh spotlight on the dire conditions endured by residents at the residential care facility. Former residents, staff, and families have revealed a grim picture of neglect, with a chronically broken elevator trapping wheelchair-bound residents on the third floor for weeks, if not months, alongside infestations and a lack of emergency preparedness.

For third-floor residents reliant on wheelchairs, a malfunctioning elevator meant virtual imprisonment. Unable to access the communal dining room, they depended on staff to

deliver meals to their rooms. Medical appointments were frequently missed due to the lack of accessible exits. Some residents, unable to go outside, resorted to smoking cigarettes or cannabis in their rooms, a practice that raised safety concerns. “They couldn’t go outside to smoke their cigarettes, so that’s why people were smoking in their rooms,” said Terry Leuvelink, whose 86-year-old mother, Eleanor Willett, perished in the fire.

The facility, a former motel in Fall River’s Kennedy Park, was plagued by more than just elevator issues. Reports of rodent and cockroach infestations had persisted for years, corroborated by state and city records. Former residents and employees also described a troubling absence of emergency planning. Debra Johnson, a certified nursing assistant who worked at Gabriel House for four years, told reporters, “No fire drills, we didn’t do anything ... no practices.” Chris Vieira, whose 64-year-old father, Alvaro, was injured in the fire, recalled only one fire drill about five years ago. A former employee, speaking anonymously to MassLive, echoed these claims, stating, “Residents deserved better care. The building was like a matchbox.”

Despite these conditions, a sense of community persisted. Anthony Hout, a resident from 2017 to 2022, described staff as caring but said complaints to management were routinely ignored. “They loved us to death,” he said, “but any time something was reported to the higher-ups, it just got blown off.” One employee wrote on Facebook, “If you were lost and had nowhere to go, you had Gabriel House,” reflecting the camaraderie among residents and staff.

The facility’s owner, Dennis Etzkorn, has not responded to requests for comment. Attempts to reach him were met with abrupt hang-ups. Etzkorn’s history includes legal troubles unrelated to safety, notably a 2012 Medicare kickback investigation involving his company, Gabriel Care. The case was dismissed after a court ruled evidence was illegally obtained, but Etzkorn later reached a civil settlement with the Attorney General’s Office for \$760,000 in 2015.

Massachusetts law mandates annual elevator inspections for facilities like Gabriel House if the elevator is in operation, with fines for non-compliance. The Americans with Disabilities Act allows temporary elevator outages but requires prompt repairs. The elevator at Gabriel House, however, was reportedly down for extended periods, with one outage lasting eight months, according to Leuvelink. A Seekonk-based company believed to service the elevator did not respond to inquiries, and state inspection records from the Board of Elevator Regulations are still pending.

The tragedy at Gabriel House raises serious questions about oversight and accountability in assisted living facilities. Residents and their families, already grappling with loss, are left wondering how such conditions were allowed to persist in a facility meant to provide care and safety.