

Trauma remains for victims of Columbia Gas explosions two years later

By [Nick Stoico](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated September 12, 2020, 9:37 p.m.



The aftermath of the September 2018 explosions, at 60 Jefferson St., Lawrence. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Vivian Nunez says a sense of panic runs through her body when she hears the pipes rumble behind the wall of her South Lawrence home.

Other times, it's the smell of burning food or the low growl of her boiler switching on in winter that sends Nunez back in time to Sept. 13, 2018.

That's when [gas explosions](#) erupted in communities across the Merrimack Valley that killed one person, injured over two dozen people, and damaged more than 100 homes and buildings.

Two years later, Nunez, 59, still has sleepless nights. When she does manage to slip into slumber, it's common for her to snap awake in the middle of the night, panicked that she can smell gas in her home.

“I don’t remember what normal life was like before that September,” said Nunez, who shared the house with her elderly father. “I’m still going to therapy every other week, I went onto all kinds of medication to stop these vivid dreams I have. After the explosion, I lost life as I knew it.”

Nunez and others affected by the explosions and fires gathered Saturday evening on a Zoom conference to discuss their experiences since that devastating day and how it continues to impact their lives today.

About 40 people participated in the virtual remembrance organized by the Merrimack Valley Project, an interfaith advocacy group that will hold a moment of prayer on Facebook Live on Sunday to mark the second anniversary of the explosions.

[Leonel Rondon](#), an 18 year old from Lawrence, was killed by the blasts caused by over-pressurized gas lines. Rondon was sitting in a car parked in the driveway of his friend’s home when the blast caused the walls of the house to collapse and crash onto the car.

In July, [Columbia Gas agreed to pay \\$56 million](#) to resolve the state’s investigations into the explosions. In addition, Eversource will buy Columbia Gas of Massachusetts from Indiana-based NiSource Inc. for \$1.1 billion, a deal that is expected to close this fall.

Attorney General Maura Healey’s office said in July that the settlement funds will be used to support low-income gas customers faced with debt and for energy-efficient projects in the cities of Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover, where the explosions occurred.

Assistant Attorney General Elizabeth Mahony told attendees in Saturday’s meetings that the state is working to create a program to help homeowners and renters affected by the explosions overcome challenges such as making home repairs, switching to energy efficient systems, and making sure their homes are up to code.

“There are so many calls, so much paperwork with Columbia Gas and your insurance companies you all had to do two years ago,” she said. “Everyone needs to focus on their family, on work, particularly this year with so many challenges, so [we want] to offer a service that takes away some of those project management challenges.”

While homeowners are faced with the cost of upgrading their homes to more energy-efficient systems, trying to make these improvements presents a different kind of challenge to renters dealing with landlords.

“That’s what we’re trying to overcome, and work with landlords to make those improvements,” Mahony said. “We want to do it in a way that doesn’t increase people’s rent. We’re going to improve these buildings and landlords should not take advantage and hike up rent.”

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