

Housemate accused of murdering woman found in burning Cheektowaga apartment

'This was an extreme incident of domestic violence'

By Anne Neville | News Staff Reporter | @AnneNeville1 on April 26, 2015 - 11:25 AM , updated April 26, 2015 at 1:25 PM

A man who shared an apartment with a 63-year-old Cheektowaga woman has been charged with murdering her after she was found dead in their burning apartment Friday morning.

Cheektowaga Police Assistant Chief James Speyer said Thomas Murphy, 58, who lived with Jean Hartwig in apartment 30 of the Williamstowne Senior Apartments on William Street, has been charged with second-degree murder in what he called an "extreme incident of domestic violence."

Cheektowaga Police Officers Tim Turnbull and James Rottger went to the apartment just before noon Friday after receiving a request from someone at a Wegmans store to check on Hartwig, who had failed to show up for work.

Police received no response when they knocked on the door, but while they stood outside the apartment, they heard smoke detectors inside begin to go off and noticed smoke coming from under the door, police said.

The officers then forced their way inside and found Murphy standing inside the apartment, which was filled with heavy smoke. "It was fully involved by the time they got into the apartment," said Speyer.

The officers found the fire burning in a bedroom and could see a person inside whom they were unable to reach, though they attempted to put out the flames with a fire extinguisher.

Doyle Fire Department arrived and extinguished the fire, and Hartwig was found dead in the bedroom.

An autopsy concluded that she had been strangled, Speyer said. "We don't know how long it had been since she had showed up for work, but we believe she had passed a day or two before the fire," said Speyer.

Speyer said Murphy had been arrested earlier this year on a charge that he held Hartwig against her will. That case was still pending in court, and Hartwig was issued an order of protection, Speyer said, that demanded that Murphy "refrain from offensive behavior, not a stay-away order."

Asked about a motive, Speyer said, "This was an extreme incident of domestic violence, which unfortunately continues to rear its ugly head."

For that reason, Speyer said, officers are alert when they are asked to check on someone. "When we get a request for a welfare check, we take those calls very seriously," he said.

Members of the Cheektowaga Police Detective Bureau, Fire Investigation Unit and Crime Scene Investigation investigated at the apartments.

Murphy was arraigned by Judge Dennis Gorski in Cheektowaga Town Court. He was held with no bail in the town lockup and was to be sent to the Erie County Holding Center.

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