Officials say Lawrence man set five fires in city

By Aneri Pattani

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LAWRENCE — Just feet from the charred remains of an early-morning six-alarm blaze that destroyed three buildings, damaged five others, and displaced 14 people, officials told residents Friday they could take comfort in knowing an alleged serial arsonist had been captured.

“The worst part of . . . serial arson fires is the fear and anxiety it creates in the community,” State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan said at a noon news conference. “People in this neighborhood should sleep a little easier tonight.”

Police arrested Jason Given, 43, Thursday night after “some old-fashioned police work, some forensic evidence, connecting with some surveillance footage in the area,” Police Chief James X. Fitzpatrick said at the press conference.

Officials called Given a serial arsonist, saying he set five fires in the city over nearly a year.

Given was charged in all five fires at his arraignment in Lawrence District Court on Friday, and is facing four counts of arson of an occupied dwelling and eight counts of burning a building, said Carrie Kimball Monahan, a spokeswoman for the Essex district attorney’s office, in a brief phone interview.

Given has no prior criminal record, Fitzpatrick said.

Police do not believe Given knew residents in any of the homes he allegedly set ablaze, said Fitzpatrick, who declined to comment on a possible motive for the crime.

“I can’t speak to [Given’s] frame of mind,” Fitzpatrick said. “I’d rather leave that for a psychiatrist.”

In addition to Thursday’s blaze, Given was accused of setting four fires at a multifamily home on Osgood Street, just a few blocks from Given’s residence on the same street. One fire was set in July, one in December, and two in March, officials said.

No one was injured in any of the fires.

Given was ordered held without bail pending a dangerousness hearing set for May 15.
Coan emphasized at the press conference that arson is not a victimless crime, noting that people lost possessions and were displaced from their homes while the city lost tax revenue.

Marc Laplante, a city councilor who represents the area where the fires occurred, said the arrest brought some reassurance.

“There is a sense of relief that the individual who is believed to have caused such emotional and physical anguish in the neighborhood has been caught,” he said in a statement. “Let’s not forget the immense challenges now facing the fire’s victims.”

The first alarm for Thursday’s blaze was struck at 4:13 a.m. Within seven minutes, it was declared a four-alarm fire, Fire Chief Brian Moriarty said.

The blaze began at a construction site on Grainger Street and quickly spread to a nearby garage and a multifamily home. The building under construction and the garage were burnt to the ground; the multifamily home suffered extensive damage.

The exteriors of five homes on Phillips, Grainger, and East Cambridge streets were also damaged. Fire department officials said the close proximity of the buildings caused the blaze to spread quickly.

Mayor Daniel Rivera said at the press conference that he hopes to combat the blight the fire caused by rebuilding homes in the area and putting in a soccer field just off East Cambridge Street. He was proud to see how city residents came together after the tragedy, he said.

“It was a very intense scene. . . . Families ended up being devastated,” he said. “Whenever this happens, though, people come together really fast. The city is resilient.”

Problems with arson are not new in Lawrence. In the 1990s, often referred to as the “flaming era” by locals, the city gained national attention for the extraordinary number of arsons that occurred, the Globe reported in 2008.

In 2011, arson was the second leading cause of fire, the Eagle-Tribune reported.

Many have attributed the problem to the prevalence of abandoned and unsecured homes in the city.