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4 dead in toxic pit in Village of Superior

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Emergency workers in the Village of Superior recovered four bodies Thursday night from a manhole at a blacktop demolition landfill. The victims appeared to have been overcome by “toxic atmosphere” in a confined space, authorities said.

All the victims were adults believed to be employed at the site, said Jim Rigstad, battalion chief for the Superior Fire Department.

Rescue workers had recovered all four bodies by 8:30 p.m.

Authorities did not release the victims’ names Thursday night.

An emergency call of people in a well came in to Douglas County about 5:30 p.m. The manhole contained water and toxic hydrogen sulfide fumes, which are commonly released from sewer products. Authorities believe the victims were overcome by fumes and did not drown, Rigstad said.

All four appeared to be dead when emergency crews arrived, he said.

Douglas County Sheriff Tom Dalbec said the four workers went into the manhole to unplug a blockage.

Dalbec said he did not know what, if any, breathing devices the workers were wearing.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration officials from Eau Claire, Wis., are expected to arrive today for an investigation, Dalbec said.

Hydrogen sulfide gas is poisonous, flammable and colorless and gives off a strong odor of rotten eggs, according to the Centers for Disease Control. At high concentrations, people can lose the ability to smell it, making it extremely dangerous. Brief exposure to high concentrations of the gas can cause difficulty breathing and loss of consciousness.

Superior firefighters outfitted with breathing apparatus appeared to lead the recovery effort. Workers pumped water out of the manhole to aid the recovery, though water still seemed to be leaking in, Rigstad said.

A sign near the site, at 5927 Albany Ave., identifies the business as Lakehead Blacktop Demolition Landfill. A business identified as Lakehead Blacktop and Materials of Superior Inc. is listed in phone directories at 5927 Albany Ave. J. Kimmes Construction is listed at the same phone number.

Joseph Kimmes III is the registered agent of the property, according to the Wisconsin Secretary of State’s Office.

Kimmes could not be reached for comment Thursday night. His sister-in-law, Mary Kimmes, tearfully declined comment when reached at her home.

Responding to the scene were 12 Superior firefighters, members of Gold Cross Ambulance, the Superior Police Department and the Douglas County Sheriff’s Department. The Douglas County medical examiner’s van arrived at the scene, along with the Superior police chaplain.

At least a dozen clearly distraught men and women arrived at the scene, then some left. As two men were talking, one screamed “What?” before bursting into tears on the hood of his truck. Dozens of family members and friends gradually gathered across the street from the landfill to grieve.

Authorities were keeping reporters several hundred yards away from the scene, near the intersection of Albany Avenue and North 61st Street.

News Tribune staff writer Brandon Stahl contributed to this report.