

## Body found in burned-out Riverside house where shooting suspect was believed to be hiding

*Unclear whether body is of suspect who shot at police and was believed to be hiding inside house.*



Members of the Riverside SWAT team approach a home on fire where police believe an officer involved shooting suspect was supposedly barricaded on Sage Ave. in Riverside on Tuesday, Feb. 21.

STAN LIM, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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**By ALI TADAYON / STAFF WRITER**

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A body has been found in a Riverside house that caught fire Tuesday morning, Feb. 21, as a SWAT team prepared to go in to find a suspect who had exchanged gunfire with police the night before, a police spokesman says.

The identity of the deceased person has not been confirmed, Riverside police Officer Ryan Railsback said.

Police believed the suspect had taken refuge overnight inside the house in the 9300 block of Sage Avenue home in the Arlington neighborhood. They did not think anyone else had been inside.

Railsback said Riverside County coroner's investigators were at the home and were trying to determine whether the body was that of the suspect.

The fire broke out about 7 a.m. Tuesday for reasons that are still under investigation, authorities said. By the time firefighters contained the fire about 11:15 a.m., the wooden roof had mostly collapsed. Even after the fire was contained, the house continued smoldering, and officials expected it to burn down to its cinderblock walls.

The flames did not spread to any neighboring houses - five of which had been evacuated during the standoff and fire.

Many surrounding streets were closed for hours, but by late afternoon, only Sage Avenue remained shut off while police and coroner's investigators worked at the house.

Railsback said the American Red Cross was called to assist the family who lived in the burned-down home. It was still unclear what their relation was to the suspect -- whether he lived with them, knew them or had picked a random home to run into.

### **SHOOTING, STANDOFF**

The confrontation started about 10:50 p.m. Monday, when officers "contacted a suspicious vehicle and occupants," Railsback said. Three people were inside the car and a fourth was standing outside.

The man outside the car took off running, Railsback said. Officers followed him onto Hawthorne Avenue, where he pulled out a firearm and shot several rounds toward them, Railsback said. No officers were injured.

The officers returned fire, though they don't know whether the suspect was struck, Railsback said.

The suspect ran away, and the officers lost him.

The people who were inside the car when the incident began were detained for questioning, Railsback said.

Officers created a perimeter and began to search the area. Eventually, the search was narrowed down to the Sage Avenue house and the SWAT team was brought in.

### **FIRE DANGER**

As SWAT officers prepared to enter the home, it caught fire, Railsback said.

Though some neighbors speculated the SWAT team may have intentionally started the fire, Railsback said that's something they would never do.

Asked whether officers used a type of tear gas that can sometimes catch fire, Railsback said he did not know.

Because of the heightened danger of dealing with a suspect who had shot at police, and the uncertainty over whether he was dead or alive and still present there, firefighters' tactics were limited.

Riverside Fire Department Capt. Tim Odebralski said firefighters stuck to hosing down the flames from a safe distance, as well as surrounding houses and trees as a precaution. They donned ballistic vests and helmets as they fought the fire and were protected by police.

Once it was deemed safe, authorities were able to conduct a more thorough search and found the body.

### **NEIGHBORS TERRIFIED**

Neighbors surrounded the taped-off scene Tuesday morning.

Emily Scarin, 27, heard the gunshots in front of her home at the corner of MacArthur and Hawthorne Avenues. She immediately called 911, and was told by dispatchers to take cover. She said she took her husband and 3-year-old son to a room, where they sat between a desk and a bed for about an hour.

"I was so scared, I couldn't breathe," Scarin said.

Bryon Awe lives next door to the house that was on fire.

He said he was "shocked" when police told him to evacuate his house. Awe, along with several other neighbors, was concerned that his pets might suffer smoke inhalation. He was able to remove his dog from the house, but had to leave his cat and bird.

Odebralski said that because the fire has not spread, animals in other homes would likely be OK.

Neighbor Demetrius Lester, who had been waiting across the street from his home in his pajamas for hours, was filled with joy when a firefighter brought out his dog.

"She's our pride and joy," Lester said.

*Staff writer Alex Groves contributed to this report.*

*This story is developing. Check back for updates.*