

# Relief sweeps W.Va. mining town

## Families learn 12 miners found alive underground

By Tom Vanden Brook  
USA TODAY

TALLMANSVILLE, W.Va. — Twelve miners trapped inside a coal mine for 42 hours were found alive shortly before midnight Tuesday, prompting screams of joy from family members in a nearby church.

"They're all alive!" screamed one woman as she ran out of the church, its bells ringing in the dark.

Harley Ables, 29, said Gov. Joe Manchin told the families that 12 of the 13 miners were OK and coming out. One miner had been found dead.

Earlier in the evening, Ben Hatfield, president of International Coal Group, which owns the mine, said rescuers had yet to find signs of the other miners. The vehicle they had been traveling in had been found abandoned.

Hatfield said at the time that it appeared that the other miners had survived the explosion Monday and had sought safety in another part of the mine.

"It's another glimmer of hope but raises the question of where the other miners could have gone," Hatfield said.

Telling the miners' families that a body had been found, he said, was "about the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Rescuers had to stop advancing through the mine shafts temporarily while they tried to restore ventilation sufficient to allow them to move farther, Hatfield said. The explosion disabled vents in the shaft.

"We remain hopeful there'll be some good news before it's all over, but hopes are certainly stretched thin," he said.

Hatfield said he did not know how the unidentified miner died. The body was found about 700 feet from the vehicle. He said rescuers would keep looking for the others. He said there was no evidence of a roof cave-in or collapse in the mine, and the vehicle was not damaged or thrown off its track.

Prospects of finding the miners alive were bleak. Before reaching the body, the rescuers had drilled narrow holes into the mine, inserted air monitors and found levels of carbon monoxide more than three times the maximum regarded as safe. The deadly gas is a byproduct of combustion, such as an explosion.

A camera lowered down a narrow hole had found no

signs of the miners. Drilling crews pounded on steel pipes but heard no sounds or response from the missing men.

The rescue crews were in the farthest reaches of the mine, 11,200 feet from its entrance, when they found the body.

The missing men were thought to be trapped 260 feet beneath the surface.

Waiting family members had retreated to the nearby Sago Baptist Church to pray and wait out the efforts. Hundreds had spent Monday night huddled in tents or wrapped in blankets in the cool, damp mountain air.

Key to hope for a miracle was whether adequate levels of oxygen in the mine and survival training could have allowed the miners to construct a shelter from the carbon monoxide.

Carbon monoxide poisons by entering the lungs through breathing and displacing oxygen from the bloodstream. It can kill swiftly and, because it is odorless and colorless, with little warning.

The cause of the explosion remained unclear, Hatfield said. Lara Ramsburg, a

spokeswoman for Gov. Joe Manchin, said it may have been sparked by lightning.

Jesse Stolzfels, 22 has worked in the mine for three years laying track for rail cars. It's a safe place to work, he said. "This was a freak accident," he said.

The best hope for the missing men is that they would have constructed a barrier against the deadly gas after the explosion. Materials to build such a structure — wood and plastic sheeting — would have been available in the mine, Hatfield said.

"Essentially, they could have built a room around themselves for safety," he said.

The explosion that trapped the miners occurred when the mine was reopening after being closed for the holidays. Ramsburg said two cars carrying miners were entering the mine when the blast occurred. The second car, carrying six miners, made it out after feeling the effects of the blast.

The accident recalled a similar drama four years ago when nine Pennsylvania coal miners were successfully rescued after being trapped for 77 hours in a flooded mineshaft 240 feet underground.



Source: ESRI USA TODAY