



## LOCAL // ENVIRONMENT

# Victims of deadly Watson Grinding explosion see first payout after years of litigation

By **Rebekah F. Ward**, *Staff writer*

Oct 4, 2024



Houston Fire Department firefighters make their way through debris near the site of an explosion at Watson Grinding and Manufacturing on Friday, Jan. 24, 2020. Two people have been reported dead by officials.

Godofredo A. Vásquez/Staff photographer

Nearly five years after a deadly gas explosion at Watson Grinding blew out the windows and crumpled the roofs of hundreds of northwest Houston homes, Natalie Pulido can still see the shards.

"At four in the morning, it just came out of nowhere. My window shattered, there was glass on my bed, everything was out of place," said Pulido, who was in high school when the blast shook her Westbranch neighborhood, killing two facility workers and one neighbor.





Clockwise from upper left: Marycruz Hernandez covers her face as she picks up a phone call inside her bedroom after the explosion; A lift attached to a crane was used by ATF investigators to survey the site; Rebecca McKeenan, center, hugs mayor Sylvester Turner as he met with residents; the explosion's aftermath.

Clockwise from upper left: Godofredo Vasquez, Mark Mulligan, Godofredo Vasquez, Marie D. De Jesus / Houston Chronicle

Pulido's flashbacks began to slow as her life marched forward: she is now in college studying to be a chemical engineer and hopes to work for NASA someday. But the shadow of the blast kept chasing her mother, Claudia, who cried with relief Thursday when she picked up her first settlement check at a nearby Residence Inn, along with scores of other plaintiffs who filed a lawsuit against Watson Grinding and other defendants.

"It was so much time waiting, waiting," Claudia said in Spanish.

Now, she is one of hundreds of neighbors who no longer need to sit tight. Lawyers and staff from the firm Kwok Daniel that led a lawsuit on their behalf passed out settlement checks to a steady stream of more than 1,000 residents Thursday and Friday.

The lawsuit involved about 2,200 claimants and 100 lawyers. Money for their neighbors who went with other firms is expected soon.





Natalie Pulido, inside left, watches as her mother, Claudia, left, accepts a settlement check Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024, from Kwok Daniel attorney Marcos Cardenas after an explosion at a Watson Grinding and Manufacturing facility damaged her house four years ago in Houston.

Kirk Sides/Staff photographer

Each plaintiff's settlement was pegged to the injuries and losses they were able to prove, leaving the highest payouts for those with homes that bordered the former chemical spray coating business.

For many recipients, the blast is not yet history. Claudia said her house still needs repairs, and every month her family has been short of money, leaning on relatives for help.

She had struggled with receiving payments from her insurance company; her first contractor made off with \$15,000; and in the midst of the COVID pandemic, her husband gave up his day job to handle some repairs himself.

Robert Kwok, the lead attorney on the multi-year case against nine defendants, including now-bankrupt Watson Grinding and Watson Valve, said the Pulidos' situation was common.

"A large group of our clients were underinsured," Kwok said. "Insurance companies sold them policies that paid out less than the homes were worth."

Area residents were wary of trusting lawyers after their insurance and contractor woes. Many, like Pulido, spoke only Spanish and feared they would be taken advantage of. Even after Kwok and others gained their trust, they thought a payout might never come.

While the individual settlement amounts are secret, Kwok said the total for all victims was much higher than the \$52 million insurance payout announced on behalf of Watson Grinding and Watson Valve in 2023. It included funds from five other defendants, though two had yet to settle.



Concerned District A residents raise their hands when asked who was affected by the Watson Grinding & Manufacturing explosion Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2020, in Houston.

Steve Gonzales/Staff photographer

## Shadows of a deadly explosion

Several months after that announcement, a federal Chemical Safety Board report found that the January 2020 blast could have been prevented with better planning and safety training.

The explosion occurred when flammable propylene gas filled the company's warehouse overnight. A hose disconnected from its fitting inside a coating booth, filling the building with flammable hydrocarbon vapor that ignited when an employee turned on the lights the next morning.

The CSB report found the facility had already been on the edge of disaster.

It said the release was caused by “a degraded and poorly crimped rubber welding hose,” along with key missing safety processes. Employees did not close the manual shutoff valve on the propylene storage tank the previous day, and the facility’s gas detection alarm, exhaust fan startup and gas shutoff system never kicked in.

Before the facility blew up, many neighbors had no idea the small industrial plant existed. When the blast woke them on Jan. 24 2020, some thought they were under attack.

“We said, ‘It’s a bomb! It’s a bomb! It exploded two times, one bigger and one smaller” said Maria Diosdada, who lives close to the former facility. With her home’s stucco walls crumpled, windows shattered and roof caved in, Diosdada ran to check on her wailing 7-month-old grandson and then huddled with her family in the rubble.





From left, sisters Maria and Amelia Diosdada describe their experiences Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024, as they remember an explosion at a Watson Grinding and Manufacturing facility that damaged their homes four years ago in Houston.

Kirk Sides/Staff photographer

When officials lifted the area's order to shelter-in-place, Diosdada and her neighbors poured into the street. With their homes and cars destroyed, they had no idea what to do next.

Many turned to relatives elsewhere in the city. But in Diosdada's case, some of her closest family members lived on the same block, including her sister whose home next to hers also crumpled from the blast.

She was not the only one: Omar Cruz and his family were living in the blast radius with his in-laws at the time, and his parents' home sat even closer to the explosion.



"My family lives in that community, that's where we'd grown up," Cruz said.

"My first reaction after we made sure everybody was OK was to run to my parents' house and see how they were doing. The explosion lifted their house and brought it back down, so the whole roof caved in" he said.

After they lost \$20,000 meant for repairs to a contractor, Cruz decided to do the job himself, pulling permits and hiring laborers to put it back together. He moved his parents back home in September 2022, giving his mom almost a year to enjoy her house before she died.



Damage is still visible on a home in the Courtyard Westway community Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024, four years after an explosion at a Watson Grinding and Manufacturing

Kirk Sides / Houston Chronicle

# The end of the road

Carol Goff was not so lucky. She lived alone in her home in Courtyard Westway, one of the tree-lined enclaves adjacent to the blast site. With no insurance, she needed the settlement to begin to repair her home, which she lived in for years with boarded-up windows and cracks slithering along its external stucco.

She died at home between those broken walls about a year before the checks came.

Now, her house is wedged between freshly-painted new construction. But all the homes on the block once looked like hers, said Jeffrey Creel, Courtyard Westway's homeowners association president.



L: Kent Heap stands inside with a crumbling ceiling inside of his sister, Carol Goff's home Sunday, Jan. 26, 2020, R: Courtyard Westway Homeowners Association President Jeffrey Creel walks Thursday, Oct. 3,

2024, as he describes the destruction from the explosion.

L: Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle. R: Kirk Sides / Houston Chronicle

"The recovery has been very gradual, there are still traces. Several houses are still boarded up, bombed-out looking," Creel said.

He was able to fix many of his own home damages with insurance money, a sum that was deducted from his settlement award, and thinks this week's check will nearly cover the rest. But he watched many neighbors abandon ship, selling their broken homes cheap to buyers with more cash on hand to do the repairs. He said that since this is the first round of settlement money to come in, any previous reconstruction was out-of-pocket or paid by insurance companies.

"People drained their savings accounts, people drained college funds for their kids. Heartbreaking. Because they simply didn't have a roof or they didn't have windows," said Kwok, the lead attorney.

While waiting over four years for a payout proved too long for some neighbors, Kwok said mass tort lawsuits like this case usually take about seven years from start to finish. This one is not yet over: while seven defendants settled, two – 3M and Teledyne Technologies – are holding out.

Kwok said the two holdouts had hired workers who went into the plant to service the fixed gas detection system, one of the malfunctions highlighted in the federal report.





L: Kent Heap sits on top of the home of his sister, Carol Goff, on Jan. 26, 2020; R: A shard of glass is embedded in the wall next to a person's bed.

Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle

Amelia, the neighbor and sister of Maria Diosdada, is preparing to meet them in court.

While she found money to do most of her home repairs – with the exception of her roof – Amelia and her husband had more than crumbled walls to worry about when the blast blew her house down.

The explosion knocked over two heavy shelves with figurines of angels and a hanging Virgin Mary that fell on the sleeping couple, striking their heads and injuring Amelia's back.

Standing on her lawn before heading out to pick up her check Thursday, Amelia pointed to her recessed scars – one on her neck, another hidden by her gray hair. Her injuries required multiple surgeries. She can walk and move around – but not like she used to.

"I had no idea that there was this factory," she said. "I'm not sure if I would have bought a house here if I knew."



Debris is piled near the former Watson Grinding & Manufacturing facility, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021, in Houston. An explosion at the facility near Gessner Road killed two people and damaged 450 structures. Mark Mulligan/Staff photographer



## Sign up for the Weekend Wrap Email

Read features, long reads and weekend news around Houston.

[Sign Up](#)

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms Of Use](#) and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our [Privacy Policy](#).

Oct 4, 2024



**Rebekah F. Ward**

REPORTER



Rebekah F. Ward is the Houston Chronicle's climate & environment reporter. She can be reached at [rebekah.ward@houstonchronicle.com](mailto:rebekah.ward@houstonchronicle.com).

Before coming to Texas, Rebekah was an investigative journalist at the Albany Times Union, where she started in 2021 as the newsroom's first Joseph T. Lyons fellow. She has worked for outlets including Reuters, France 24 and the OCCRP, reporting from the U.S., Colombia, Mexico and her native Canada.

### Editor's Picks



**RESTAURANTS & BARS**

**Top 25 taco spots in the Houston area**



**TEXAS**

**Mysterious 100-foot geyser of salty water erupts in West Texas**



**CRIME**

**Ex-Hosp sent**



Featured Interactives



HOUSTON

The top 10 Houston neighborhoods with the best and worst sidewalks...



INVESTIGATIONS

Inside a mysterious \$95M Texas lotto win: A Houston Chronicle...

TEXAS

Texas How could

Let's Play



SpellTower



Pile-Up Poker



Typeshift



Really Bad Chess



Top

About

Contact

Services

Account

[Your Privacy Choices \(Opt Out of Sale/Targeted Ads\)](#)