

# Accused New Bedford Arsonist Released on Low Bail, Defaults and Flees

A 25-year-old New Bedford man with extensive ties to Puerto Rico, who was released on just \$500 cash bail after being arrested for setting a multi-family dwelling on fire this past February, did not show up for his recent Superior Court arraignment is now a fugitive from justice.

On February 28th at 1:54 PM New Bedford Fire responded to an active blaze at 330 North Front Street, a multifamily dwelling with several occupied apartments, including one rented by the defendant, Xavier Betancourt Echevarria. During the ensuing investigation into the fire, investigators located a Sunny Delight container with gasoline in it inside the defendant's bathroom. The Arson K-9 on scene alerted on the rear hallway as the fire's point of origin and also alerted on the Sunny Delight container.

The defendant, who resided at the apartment with his wife and children, was interviewed by police. During that first interview, the defendant told investigators the container was used by his wife to clean. However, upon speaking with the wife, investigators learned his story was fabricated. During a second interview with police, the defendant admitted he set the building on fire because he was mad at the landlord, who had begun eviction proceedings against the defendant. He told police he bought the gas at a gas station that day, and put it in the Sunny Delight container. He then brought it back to 330 North Front, poured it in the hallway, and started the fire with a lighter he had on his person, he told police. Video surveillance obtained by investigators shows the defendant leave his house, get the gas at the gas station and return to his house.

As a result of the arson, all apartment units had to be evacuated, and the damage from the fire caused 13 people to be displaced at least for that day. It was further learned during the investigation that the defendant recently came from Puerto Rico to live in New Bedford. And, during his district court bail hearing, his defense counsel informed the court that the defendant suffered from various mental health issues which required medication.

Despite prosecutors' efforts to have the defendant held without bail for up to 120 days as a danger to the community in New Bedford District Court, Judge Franco Gobourne ruled the defendant was not a danger to the public and also refused to set appropriate bail. Instead, the judge released the defendant on \$500 cash bail.

The defendant was subsequently indicted for arson of a dwelling and was to appear for his arraignment on the indictment in Fall River Superior Court earlier this month.

A default warrant for the defendant's arrest was issued in Fall River Superior Court, and it is believed he may have fled back to Puerto Rico.

"This is an example of a case where the low bail set by the court was totally inadequate and an abuse of judicial discretion. The defendant set fire to an occupied multi-family home, has no strong ties to our area, has mental health issues and confessed to the crime. It is clear that this defendant should've been held as a danger to community. Not many crimes are more dangerous than setting fire to an occupied building. At the very least, much higher bail should have been set because of his strong ties to Puerto Rico. It is no surprise that he did not appear for his Superior Court arraignment," Bristol County District Attorney Thomas M. Quinn III said. "This is clearly an individual who doesn't belong out on the streets. Based on the facts of this case, there is a strong likelihood this defendant would have been facing a prison

sentence. Bail decisions like the one in this case undermines confidence in the administration of justice, and serves no one's interest but the defendant's."