

Gas leak forces evacuation at chip plant

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Six people were treated and 20 to 50 others evacuated early Wednesday after a leak of toxic phosphine gas at a Santa Clara computer chip plant.

Firefighters in protective clothing carried two employees thought to have been exposed to the gas out of LSI Logic Corp., 3105 Alfred St., at 4:30 a.m. Workers were allowed to return to the building at 8:10 a.m., LSI spokesman Bruce Entin said.

Steve Vigil, 24, and Geraldine Dobbs, 47, were given high concentrations of oxygen by firefighters and then treated by paramedics, Battalion Chief Robert Murgallis said.

Vigil was treated and released by Kaiser hospital in Santa Clara, Entin said, and Dobbs was treated and released by O'Connor Hospital.

Entin said four other employees were not directly exposed to the gas but exhibited symptoms of exposure. They were also treated and released by area hospitals and clinics.

They were: Don Gerard, Valley Medical Center; Felicia Aquino, O'Connor Hospital; Jenny Corrales and Barbara Boyles, California Medical Industrial Clinic in Santa Clara.

Entin said the accident was the result of human error.

Vigil, a maintenance worker, was replacing a filter on a pipe that he thought he had already cleared of gas. But instead of open-

ing a valve on the pipe he had just cleared — a silane gas pipe — he mistakenly opened the valve on a different pipe filled with the phosphine gas.

He said Vigil got the gas valve closed within about 30 seconds, while the plant's detector system warned employees to evacuate. The company's emergency response team responded, followed by the Santa Clara Fire Department's team.

"This could have been a big deal if it hadn't been for the plant's safety system," Fire Department chemist Bob Campbell said. "The safety mechanism worked perfectly."

As an extra precaution, Entin said, the affected area was closed to employees, and production was

halted until about 6 p.m. Wednesday.

The company makes chips for integrated circuits.

Murgallis said a mixture of nitrogen and 15 percent phosphine was being used Wednesday morning.

At higher concentrations, phosphine can be fatal, but Campbell said a 15 percent concentration is well below the danger level.

Exposure to high concentrations of the gas primarily would cause respiratory reactions, Murgallis said, adding, "It's extremely toxic and can be absorbed through the skin."

Mercury News Staff Writer Mitchel Benson contributed to this report.

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