

Another victim of welfare reform: 11-month-old baby dies in Pennsylvania house fire

Paul Scherrer
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An 11-month-old baby became the fifth fatality in Western Pennsylvania directly attributed to welfare reform laws that drastically cut benefits for young mothers.

On Wednesday, March 17, Melvin Rudolph III of Wilksburg was killed when a space heater caught fire in the one-bedroom second floor apartment in which he lived. Melvin would have turned one on March 26. Fire department officials say the fire was caused by the cord of a space heater used to heat the room. The mother, 16-year-old Tiffany Bennett, had left her baby home while she attended school at the area Job Corps. She feared that the daycare center where she usually took her son would not accept him because he had an ear infection. Tiffany had expected the boy's father to be home before she left for school, and assumed he would be home shortly.

The state welfare department has gone to great lengths to deny that welfare reform is in any way responsible for the child's death. Department of Public Welfare spokesperson Mary Ellen Fritz said, "This is not welfare reform gone astray." In violation of department policy on the confidentiality of clients, Fritz said that Tiffany Bennett "was not on welfare and she was not required to go to school."

The local media has begun a witch-hunt against the young mother, all but directly calling for her to be prosecuted for child neglect and homicide. Local prosecutors have stated that they are considering what charges to file against the girl. However a careful examination of the situation faced by the mother and events surrounding this tragic fire reveals new welfare policies targeting the poor are responsible.

The welfare act passed by Congress in 1996 and signed into law by President Bill Clinton stipulates that states cannot provide benefits to any parent below the

age of 18 who is not living with their parents or a supervising adult. Tiffany's mother, Diane Bennett, was able to sign up Tiffany and her son for food stamps and medical assistance while Tiffany was living with her. As a result they were receiving \$235 a month in food stamps, which even by conservative estimates would only amount to 70 percent of the cost of feeding the young mother and child. As a condition of receiving these benefits, however, Tiffany was required to be either enrolled in school or a G.E.D. or high school equivalency program.

Prior to the 1996 welfare reform act someone in Tiffany's position would have been eligible for food stamps, medical assistance and a cash benefit. She would not have been required to work or participate in a job training program until her children were five years old and ready to go to public school.

Schools designed to accept students with children are few and far between, and there are no such schools in Wilksburg. Only one school in the region, located in Pittsburgh, is specifically set up to provide education for these young parents. It has avoided closure for the last three years only due to protests organized by students and their parents. Tiffany was not eligible to attend this school because she lived outside of the district. Instead she attended the federally funded Job Corps, where she studied for her G.E.D. and to learn to be a nurse's assistant. The facility has a daycare center where Tiffany's son was enrolled.

Classes at the facility ran from 7:50 in the morning to 3:50 in the afternoon. Tiffany and her son had to ride two buses to reach the center, more than an hour each way. Job Corps staff said that Tiffany was a good student with no disciplinary problems.

That a space heater started the fire that killed young Melvin Rudolph is not unusual. A high percentage of

the house fires that kill 5,000 people yearly in the US are the result of faulty or misused space heaters. Yet their widespread use is an accepted fact of life because many low-income residences are not adequately heated, or tenants cannot afford to heat them.

There were no smoke detectors in the apartment where the fire broke out, and the one on the second floor landing was not working. The fire department was only called to the scene after the downstairs neighbor, Diane Green, smelled smoke and her smoke detector went off. Fire officials reported that they only had to use 12 gallons of water to extinguish the fire. Had there been either a working smoke or carbon monoxide detector in the bedroom, perhaps the fire department would have arrived soon enough to save the child.

Diane Green said that Tiffany was a very loving mother. "Every time I saw the baby he was happy and smiling. She always had him on her hip. I saw her carrying three bags in one hand and the baby on her hip coming from the store. You could tell she loved the baby and he was happy.

"The reports tried to make her out to be a criminal, but who knows what a child will do in a desperate situation? I didn't realize she was only 16 years old. All of the tenants here are new and we didn't really know each other. We saw each other for the first time after the fire. I know Tiffany took care of the baby. In the month that I have been in this apartment I have hardly ever heard the baby cry."

This is the second fire in Western Pennsylvania this winter which claimed the lives of young children while their mothers attempted to meet government requirements for welfare benefits. In November four small children in Farrell, a town northwest of Pittsburgh, died when the apartment they were living in caught fire while their mother went to pick up a babysitter so she could go to work.

This month the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare began cutting 36,000 families off of welfare benefits because their two-year time limit has expired. In total, 117,000 families stand to lose their benefits if they fail to meet the state's mandatory work requirements.

Joni Rabinowitz of Just Harvest, a national food bank and advocacy group on hunger and welfare issues, explained, "This law is forcing a lot of people between a rock and a hard place. Technically speaking, the

welfare department will claim that she did not have to go to training since the child was under one. Yet you have to remember that the mother was only a child herself and it is very easy to get intimidated, and she may not have been aware of all of her rights.

"This was very tragic, but I can tell you that there are thousands of children who are being left home alone because their parents have no other choice."



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