Six die in Detroit house fire

Firefighters not equipped to cut through home's security bars

Tim Tower
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In the early morning hours of Thursday, December 3 a fire broke out in a house on Strathmore Street in Detroit. Three children, their mother, grandmother and great grandmother were overcome by smoke and died. Their father Michael Anderson returned home from work to the tragedy.

Neighbors said that after the fire started around 3 a.m. the mother, Monique, had run upstairs, dialed emergency at 911, and come out of the house with the great grandmother Bernice Maurant, a retired nurse. Before the fire trucks arrived, she and Bernice had gone back in to rescue the children, and then none of them were able to escape.

Michael and his wife Monique had been living in the basement of the house using a space heater, the apparent cause of the fire. They were staying with Monique's mother and grandmother for a few weeks while waiting to finalize the purchase of a house of their own nearby.

The dead are Bernice Maurant, 65, Christine Maurant, 50, Monique Anderson, 23 and her children Daniel Maurant,10, Michael Anderson, Jr., 6 and Nichelle Anderson, 2. Five of the victims were found in the living room and one in the kitchen.

Security bars on the doors and windows obstructed the firemen from entering the home. Many years have passed since a fireman designed a tool to quickly break through security bars to rescue the victims of a house fire. Still the Detroit Fire Department has not supplied each of its engines with the device.

This year 47 have died in house fires in Detroit. Last year a record 80 perished, half of them children.

"When we look at this, we are losing precious lives. We are losing time in getting to the matter and getting it taken care of," said Liddell Tupper, a student at the University of Michigan Dearborn who has known the family all his life. "The firemen are not supplied adequately. What's going on? Is this not important to us as a community?"

Tupper continued, "I think that every house should be insured through our fire department, and families provided with adequate smoke detectors." He said that a smoke alarm was sounding when the fire department arrived on the scene, but because there was not one in the basement the warning may have been delayed.

"It is not just enough to say, 'Come on down and get a free smoke detector.' Why don't we have any community relations? Let's find out if these families are implementing these fire prevention guidelines that we have provided. It's one thing to say don't do this, or that; it's another thing to teach a person how to protect themselves. I'm sorry, it's a hurting thing. Not enough is being done.

"The fire department has a responsibility. It's about getting out here in the community. I am totally against them not having the time. I haven't had anyone come to my house on this. They should be explaining how to get out of a house filled with smoke. Do you lie on the ground, do you crawl out, do you bust out windows? All of these are educating factors which could save lives.

"To add insult to injury, just a couple of weeks ago they had a fire at a church. The pastor complained that there was not enough water pressure to put out the fire and not enough equipment available. Something has got to be done."

Geraldine Cleveland, who lives across the street, reported to the *WSWS* what she had been told by the

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next door neighbor who witnessed the tragedy unfold. She said that after the firemen arrived "it took such a long time to get into the house. She prayed that nobody was in there because she knew, with all this smoke coming out, that they couldn't possibly be alive. Finally, when they did get in and they brought the bodies out, they were all dead."

Charles N. Rice is a Detroit firefighter who has the special assignment of stress management for emergency service personnel following traumatic events such as multiple deaths, the deaths of children, and deaths or severe injuries of firefighters. He explained some of the frustrations firefighters face and said that critical issues behind the loss of lives included "lack of training, lack of having the proper tools to snatch the bars off the windows and issues related to smoke detectors."

"We've been installing them," Rice said, "but what's going on between the smoke detectors sitting here, the department giving them out, or us putting them up? Does this fall under the heading of fire fighting, or community services? We have a community services department that handles community affairs. Should community affairs be doing this, should fire prevention be doing this, or should firefighters be doing this?

"Let's say firefighters will do it. Now what are firefighters doing? Firefighters are doing building inspections, we're doing hydrants. Also we're extinguishing fires. We are doing smoke detectors too, now.

"Now, wait a minute; hold it. We're going to do all this, and now you catch a fire. Now what? The fire's over there, we're over here. Response time is two minutes, but we're on one side of the district doing something else."

The organization We Care at seeking funds to defray funeral expenses for the family. They can be reached in the US at 313-933-1807.

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