

# Detroit house fire claims three more lives

## Defective fire hydrants hamper rescue efforts

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Three Detroit residents, including two children ages 10 and 13, died in a house fire December 13 in the second deadly blaze to hit the city in the space of two weeks. As in the earlier tragedy, which claimed the lives of six children—ages 2-7—on December 1, rescue efforts by firefighters were hampered by malfunctioning fire hydrants.

The fire, on Cortland Avenue in an impoverished central Detroit neighborhood, killed two sisters, Rayshonda Pugh, 13, and Raymonda Pugh, 10, as well as Carlos Lumpkin, 22, the boyfriend of the children's mother. Firefighters lost precious time hooking up their hoses to three fire hydrants on two different streets before finding one that worked.

Rhonda Davis, 29, the mother of the children, jumped out of a second floor window, along with her seven-year-old son, Hashim Rhodes. Davis is presently in the hospital, listed in critical condition, after suffering second- and third-degree burns over a third of her body.

Two other people who were also in the apartment escaped down the home's front stairs.

The family was living on the second floor of a two-story flat, typical of the aging housing stock in Detroit. The family in the downstairs apartment safely escaped the blaze.

Carol Rhodes, a family relative, told a local television station the mother “ran into the house to try to save her kids.” Rhodes said the mother was overwhelmed by smoke. “She jumped off the roof and broke her leg,” stated Rhodes, “and she's badly burned. She couldn't get my nieces because it was in the back of the house.”

Elle Dawson, a neighbor across the street, said she saw the firemen trying to connect to the hydrants. “They had to go all the way around the corner to the next street, to Highland Street, to get water. I saw two or three trucks trying to get water, but they couldn't get

any,” stated Dawson.

“It's just awful the way their life was taken,” she continued. “I knew the girls because they would come over to my house and play with my grandchildren. They were the same age. But the firemen did all they could do. I don't blame them when they are doing all they can. There was no water. What can you do?”

According to fire officials, firemen first tried the hydrant in front of the house, but it did not work. They then went around the block, to Highland Street, but that hydrant also failed. They finally found a hydrant at the end of the street where the fire was located.

As has been routine, fire officials, answerable to Democratic Mayor Dennis Archer, denied that the city's decaying infrastructure had anything to do with the deaths in this fire or in the December 1 fire on St. Antoine on the city's east side. While acknowledging that broken fire hydrants are a widespread problem, they said their malfunctioning was not responsible for the deaths.

A recent article in the *Detroit News* noted that out of 34,000 hydrants in the city, more than 2,000 are in serious disrepair, including close to 700 that are not functioning at all. The Detroit Fire Department is responsible for checking all hydrants, but the city's Water and Sewerage Department is in charge of repairs. It is noteworthy that while the Water and Sewerage Department has fallen well behind in its schedule for repairing broken hydrants, city officials insist the department shut off service to Detroit families if they fall behind on their water bills.

During the past decade scores of Detroit residents have needlessly died in fires due to budget cuts and the indifference of city officials. According to the *Detroit News*, over the last four years alone, 21 fire-related deaths took place because of faulty fire equipment,

including ladder trucks that officials knew did not work, or because of closed fire stations.

The death toll from house fires generally rises in the winter because poor families are forced to use low-cost space heaters and old furnaces to warm homes already plagued by faulty wiring, dried-out wooden frames and other dangerous conditions. In the last years for which figures are available, 57 fire-related deaths occurred in Detroit in 1997 and the total climbed to 80 in 1998.

Those paying the highest price for the decaying social conditions have been children. Between 1995 and 1999 one of three people, or 32 percent, of those killed in Michigan fires were 19 or younger. A total of 336 children died in this period, according to the Michigan State Police. According to local news sources, updated figures for Detroit—including the number of children who have died—are not available because the Detroit Fire Department no longer tracks the number of fire-related fatalities.



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