

House fire in Delaware claims the lives of 11 members of one family

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The new year began with another tragic house fire in the US. This time the victims were 11 members of one impoverished black family living in a rural area of Delaware. The early morning blaze on January 3 was the latest of a series of fatal fires in working class and poor neighborhoods during one of the harshest winters on record in many parts of the country.

The fire occurred in Oak Orchard, in the southern portion of the mid-Atlantic state, about 100 miles east of Washington DC. The town is typical of those in the area, where low-income workers live in trailer parks and small houses surrounded by expensive summer resorts for tourists. More than a dozen people—from at least three generations—were crowded into the single-level house where the fire erupted. Four women were reportedly caring for seven or more children—ages nine and younger—in the three-bedroom house.

Killed in the fire were Jacquelin Wright, 28, along with her five children: Jeremy Wright, 9, Latasha Odums, 7, Terrance Odums, 4, Berlinda Ferdinand, 23 months, and Bertony Ferdinand, 11 months. Ms. Wright's mother, Elta Mae Street, 50, and her grandmother Evelyn Shelton, 83, also died. In addition, Jacquelin Wright's half-sister and Elta Mae Street's daughter, Jody Shelton, 31, and Jody's children, Lashanda Shelton, 7, and Christopher Shelton, 5, were killed.

According to a report issued by the Delaware state fire marshal, investigators believe the fire started when someone tried to cook a late night meal in the kitchen and possibly fell asleep. Investigators said hot oil probably ignited and the fire then climbed the kitchen walls, consuming oxygen to create a smoldering fire with few flames. The report stated a woman from the house dialed the “911” emergency number at 3 a.m., but the phone went dead before the call was completed.

Fire investigators also found an oil-burning heater being used by the family but ruled that it was not a factor in the fire.

In a response typical of authorities after an accidental fire in a poor area, the state fire marshal's office announced that it would investigate the blaze as a possible crime. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the federal agency that investigates interstate transportation of illegal drugs and bombs, is reportedly joining the investigation.

Neighbors and relatives said the family was poor and depended on donations of food to survive. “They were struggling,” stated Ronald Geary, a relative. “The kids had a hard life,” stated neighbor Jocelyn Harmon. “They [the family] always had problems.” Harmon, who is also a substitute teacher at the Long Neck elementary school where two Wright children attended school, said the family had recently begun to rely on food donations from churches.

Harmon's husband, Tyrone, said at the time of the fire he was afraid there might have been even more victims because two other children stayed at the house periodically. “We counted the bodies to make sure,” he said. “We thought it would be 13.”

This was the second time in a little more than two months that a fire took the lives of a family in southern Delaware. Five family members, including four children, were killed on October 31 in another nearby tourist area, Broadhill Beach.

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Numerous fires have already taken place throughout the US, as families try to adjust to cold weather and a 50 percent jump in heating costs over last year. Because of high utility costs and poor housing conditions that barely protect against the cold, many poorer families

rely on dangerous portable heating equipment that often leads to fires. In many cases sleeping children are among the most likely victims.

According to reports published by the National Fire Protection Association, between 1993 and 1997 nearly one in three fire deaths were children under the age 19, with the majority of this group aged five and under. “January is the peak month for fire deaths in the year,” stated NFPA statistics expert Margie Coloian. “February comes in second and December third,” she told the *WSWS*. “While smoking is the leading cause of fires,” she said, “smoking combined with portable heaters in the cold months account for the increase in deaths during the winter months.”

The National Fire Data Center, a federal government agency, reports that America leads the industrialized world in deaths from fires. More than 80 percent of all fire deaths occur in homes or apartments. In 1999 alone 3,570 Americans lost their lives and another 21,875 were injured as a result of fires. Over the last decade, an average of 4,453 people a year were killed and another 26,445 were injured in fires, with most fatalities occurring in the poorer Southern states.

The aging and decaying homes that so many poor families are forced to live in are a major factor contributing to these deaths. Old dry-rotted wooden homes with poor insulation are literally death traps, where fires spread so rapidly that inhabitants have little time to escape.



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