

Seven die in Pennsylvania house fire

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Six children and the mother of three of them died in a house fire early last Saturday morning near Waynesburg in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation but is focusing on space heaters the family was using to heat the one-and-a-half-story woodframe three-bedroom home.

The family had been without gas heat since 2005 and were relying on a wood-burning stove and additional space heaters in the bedrooms. Family members told news media that on Friday night they had run out of dry wood, forcing them to depend more on the space heaters.

Temperatures in the area dropped to 1 below zero Fahrenheit Friday night, and temperatures for the previous three weeks were well below freezing most of the time.

Killed in the fire were Rebecca Eddy, 26, and her three daughters, Tiffany Blake, 10, Rebecca Marie Blake, 9, and Diamon Nicole Blake, 7. Also killed in the blaze were the three children of Mrs. Eddy's brother-in-law, Donna Jo Arthur, 5, Joshua Lee Arthur Jr., 3, and Christopher Arthur, 2.

Eleven people were sleeping in the house at the time of the fire—five adults and the six children. Rebecca Eddy's husband Steve; her brother-in-law Joshua Arthur Sr., 28, whose three children were killed; Mrs. Eddy's brother, Robert Husner, 27; and their mother, Lucille Treat were able to escape the blaze. Mr. Arthur's children did not live at the house, but were visiting him for the weekend.

The bodies of five of the children were found scattered throughout the home. Rebecca Eddy's body was found in the bathroom, holding one of her nephews.

A family spokesman stated that when the fire broke out, around 3:30 Saturday morning, Joshua Arthur was awoken by screams and ran to a nearby home to call

911 because the family had no phone in the house. When he returned, he and Steve Eddy attempted several times to enter the rooms where the children were sleeping but were forced back by the smoke and heat. Both Mr. Arthur and Mr. Eddy were hospitalized with severe burns. The house had only one smoke detector and it was not working.

Robert Husner said that he and his sister Rebecca were leaving the house together, but that she turned back when she heard one of the children call.

Fire officials who got to the house shortly after the call reported that flames were 10 to 15 feet high, coming out of all the windows and doorways.

The funeral for Mrs. Eddy and her three children was held on Wednesday, and hundreds of family, friends and neighbors attended. The funeral arrangements for Mr. Arthur's three children have yet to be announced.

Heidi Harbarger, who attended the funeral, said, "This is the worst tragedy in a long time. They were lovely and caring people. Their gas furnace did not work, and they were using electric heaters and a wood-burning stove. They were hard-working, but just not making enough, yet they were the kind of people who would give you the shirt off their backs if you needed it.

"The furnace was broke, they asked the landlord to fix it, but I guess he never did."

The obvious question is: why didn't the family have gas heat and who is responsible?

Robert Husner, who was living in the house at the time, told reporters that the gas had been cut off because the furnace was broken, and that his sister was trying to get assistance to have it repaired. The landlord of the home has refused media requests for interviews.

A spokesperson for Equitable Gas Co., the utility that provides natural gas in this area, refused to discuss specifics of the fire but instead referred to several programs that people can access for help in paying for

heating bills. In reality, these programs have been severely curtailed, and it is very difficult for families to obtain support. Those who do get the support find it only pays a fraction of heating bills.

Laws that prevent utility companies from cutting off gas during the winter months are limited, and there is no restriction on cutting off service during the spring or summer. Gas utilities are not required to reconnect service during the winter or even contact disconnected customers and try to make arrangements so that their service can be restored. Equitable Gas says that the home was without gas service since May 2005.

This tragedy also points to the seldom-reported problem of extreme poverty in rural areas of the country. Green County, in southwestern Pennsylvania, has one the highest poverty rates and the lowest average income of any county in the state. Median household income was just over \$31,000 in 2005 compared to \$43,000 for Pennsylvania as a whole.

According to official statistics, more than 15 percent of the population lives below the poverty level. Only Philadelphia and Fayette counties have higher poverty rates. Fayette County borders on Green County and shares many of its characteristics. Homelessness is concealed, as many families live together in overcrowded homes.

Stacy Lewis commented, “There are not many jobs around here. Sure, if all you are looking for is fun money; but if you are trying to raise a family and pay your bills, there are not many jobs that pay enough. Most places want you to work for low wages and without benefits. People have to chose between food and heat, and this is what happens.”

Green County was hit hard by the closure in coal mines throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. In the last few years, there has been a slight rebound in mining, but that has only resulted in a fraction of the former jobs and wages are far below their pre-shutdown levels. Many of the companies that had been built up to service the mining industry also closed and have yet to return.

With gas prices rising at double-digit rates, many families can’t pay for both heat and food and have turned to other methods to heat their homes during the winter. One only has to drive around this community to see the smoke of wood-burning stoves or the wood piles on the sides of homes.

Kevin Cunningham and Candy Anderson came to the funeral. Kevin is a cousin of the three girls that died in the fire.

“I still can’t believe this,” he said. “There are not words that you can say. They were great girls, always happy, smiling and playing.

“People don’t realize about life, it is very hard around here. There is no real work to do, most people end up working in stores and places like that. But you can’t pay your bills and raise a family on that.

“I have been laid off for three months from construction. I just took a job in the coal mine. I will be working above ground; I don’t even know how much I will be making, but it is the best job around.

“I think there has to be some help for people who don’t have heat. It has been real cold here, and people have to find a way to stay warm.”



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