

# Mother, three children perish in Detroit house fire

Mark Rainer, Shannon Jones  
22 May 2007

A pregnant mother and her three young children were killed in a house fire in southwest Detroit early Monday morning. The father remains in critical condition, with burns over 85 percent of his body.

Neighbors say the house caught fire rapidly and was engulfed in flames within five minutes. Several neighbors called 911 to report the fire. When the department was slow to respond, neighbors took desperate action to try to stop it and save the family. A neighbor told the WSWs, "It spread fast. It took 15-20 minutes for the fire department to come. I watched out my window and I saw the whole fire."

"They got the husband out first, and he was all burned," she said. "It was after the fire department got here that they found the first child. Ten minutes later they got the mother, and after another five minutes they had the other child. They put a blanket over the mother, they said she was still alive, but in bad condition."

A neighbor down the street heard the children screaming and rushed over, where he pulled the father from the burning house. His mother spoke to the WSWs, "My son inhaled so much smoke he can hardly talk. The kids were crying out so my son tried to help. Five minutes later there was no sound."

Detroit city fire officials said the cause of the fire is undetermined. However, a barbeque grill on the family's backyard porch is suspected. Apparently, the family had been barbequing on Sunday.

Living next door, Julie Cline's home suffered extensive damage, including to her bedroom, and she said she has no insurance to cover it. "The siding is the most expensive. I don't know where I can get the money," she said. Her sister in law, Valerie Lowry, told the WSWs, "My sister-in-law had no insurance. Her upstairs is messed up. Her bed was burnt. The roof is messed up. They'll have to repair it themselves. Thank

god their neighbors woke them up and got them out, otherwise it would have been worse."

Neighbors say the mother and father both emigrated from Guadalajara, Mexico and had lived at the house for the past three years. The three children killed included a seven-year-old girl, a five-year-old girl, and a three-year-old boy. The mother was pregnant and was expecting another child in June.

The family was described as kind and hardworking. Joseph Cline, Julie Cline's son, told the WSWs, "I knew the family pretty well. I helped put up their back fence. They put in windows yesterday." He said the father's name was Dave Soto, though he didn't know the wife, who spoke only Spanish. "He was a machine operator, and he worked a lot of hours."

The house was located in a working class neighborhood in southwest Detroit, home to many immigrant workers from Mexico. All the houses in this neighborhood showed significant age, with many falling into disrepair. Julie Cline said, "My house is about 85 years old. This whole neighborhood went up in the 1920s or early 1930s. They are all wood frame houses, packed very close together."

Like many houses in Detroit, the Soto's house lacked working smoke detectors, which was no doubt a factor in the inability of the family to get out in time.

Many neighbors complained of the amount of time it took for the fire department to reach the scene. Lowry said, "The fire department is four blocks away and it took 15 minutes to get here. To me that's unacceptable. They said the house went up in five minutes."

Julie Cline said, "Ron, my neighbor, was very mad that it took the fire department so long to come. He was screaming. He woke me and my girls up. The neighbors all had their hoses out. It didn't make a dent in it. There was nothing we could do except get out of the way."

Two other Detroit house fire deaths were reported on Sunday, both only miles away from the Soto's house. These fire deaths take place in the context of Detroit's crumbling infrastructure and sharp cuts in the city's budget. Both the firefighter's union and the fire department have warned of that cuts in funding for rigs and firefighters put the public safety at risk. Despite these warnings, in 2005 the Detroit City Council ordered more cuts to the fire department.

The Detroit Fire Department has recently seen a number of problems with its fire fighting rigs. According to an article published May 10 in the *Detroit Free Press*, during a recent spate of fires, out of the city's 66 firefighting rigs about 22 percent were either unavailable to answer alarms or were working with broken equipment.

The newspaper reported, "The Detroit Fire Department finds itself in the same enfeebled condition as many other departments in the city. Mayors have been cutting personnel and services across the municipal government for decades because of a budget crisis that stems from 50 years of business and human flight from the city."

"Even Scott, the fire commissioner, has warned of safety consequences to cutbacks, according to documents filed in connection with a case between the city and firefighters union before the Michigan Supreme Court over further retrenchment," the newspaper reported. "In 2005, after the Detroit City Council ordered even greater cuts to the fire department than the mayor wanted, Scott wrote [Detroit Mayor Kwame] Kilpatrick that taking more rigs out of service would increase fire crews' injuries, runs and response times, and potentially would increase citizens' loss of life and property."

Although it is not yet known whether the decay of the Detroit Fire Department played a role in Monday's early morning fire, there can be no doubt that cuts in the budget have contributed to a greater risk for residents throughout the city.



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