

Ten die in western Pennsylvania house fire

Gas had been cut off since May 2005

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Ten people died in a house fire that broke out early last Thursday morning, April 3, in rural western Pennsylvania. Gas service had been cut off in May of 2005 to the home in Brockway, a town of about 2,000 people 100 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Authorities are still investigating the cause of the fire, but believe a space heater may have sparked the blaze.

Nine members from three generations of the Peterson family, ranging in age from four months to 40 years, were killed in the fire that started around 2:30 in the morning and quickly engulfed the wood-frame home. A family friend who had been spending the night was also killed.

Killed in the blaze were Kimberly Peterson, 40, the grandmother, along with five of her children; Rebecca Peterson, 17; Douglas Peterson III, 13; Isaac Peterson, 8; Grace Peterson, 6; and 11-month-old Lillian Peterson.

Also killed were Rebecca Peterson's daughter, four-month-old Cailyn Watson, and Elizabeth Peterson's two children, four-year-old Domanic DeIullo and two-year-old Desiree DeIullo. Elizabeth's fiancé Jason Mowry, 19, was also killed.

Elizabeth Peterson, 20, escaped the blaze by jumping from a second story window along with her brother, 11-year-old James, who had been awakened by the flames and tried to wake other family members before running to a neighbor's house to get help.

Also surviving was Doug Peterson Jr., Kimberly's husband, who was working the night shift at a glass factory in a nearby town.

The fire began in the living room, where four of the victims were found, and quickly spread throughout the rest of the house. Firefighters arrived at 2:50 a.m., but the house had already been swallowed up in flames.

Fire Chief Kris Benson said that the front of the

house was ablaze when he arrived at 2:50 a.m. He tried to enter the two-story wood-frame home twice, but was driven back by smoke and flames. "This fire had a very, very good jump on us," he said.

Since the fire, a steady stream of cars have driven past the home with many people leaving notes of condolences or teddy bears and balloons to express their sympathy. Several thousand people from all around Brockway and neighboring communities attended two memorial viewings held in the high school auditorium on Sunday. Funeral services are also being held in the high school on Monday.

While the news media has spent a lot of time reporting on this horrible tragedy, no consideration has been given by the media to the social conditions underlying it, or of the whole host of similar fires that claim the lives of thousands each year in the US.

Authorities have not yet determined the cause of the blaze, except to say space heaters were being used inside the frame house, and they are suspected as the most likely cause. State fire investigators also said that they did not know if the house had working smoke detectors.

Brockway is located in rural Jefferson County. Average wages for workers in the county were only \$26,457 in 2003. The median household income is just \$35,277, more than \$9,000 below that of Pennsylvania and almost \$13,000 below that of the country as a whole. Nearly 10 percent of Brockway's population lives below the official poverty level.

Gas service had been off at the house in May 2005, according to Julie Coppola-Cox, a spokeswoman for National Fuel Gas Distribution Corp., the company that supplies natural gas to the area. She supplied no further details.

Utility companies often disconnect gas service in the

spring as winter heating bills pile up. Once service has been disconnected, however, it is very difficult for families to get it restored. Not only are families required to pay all back bills along with interest and penalties, but they usually have to pay disconnection and reconnection service charges and post a large deposit before gas companies will restore service.

Once a family loses natural gas they are forced to use wood burning stoves, or kerosene and electric space heaters. All three are extremely dangerous and a major cause of both house fires and carbon monoxide poisoning. Even families that have not had their service disconnected have turned to space heaters in an attempt to save on the high cost of gas.

Heating assistance programs at both state and federal levels have been drastically reduced. State regulations make it difficult for utilities to terminate service during the winter months. However, there are no state or federal laws that require utilities to restore service the following winter if the family has been unable to pay the bill.

Since 2005, the price for natural gas has more than doubled for homeowners. During the winter months it is not uncommon for homeowners to see bills of \$500 or more, even in well-insulated homes. Many families are forced to choose between eating and heating their homes.

While the high price of heating fuel and natural gas has been a disaster for millions of working class families, the gas and oil companies have been making billions in profits. On February 7, National Fuel reported that it had made record earnings the previous quarter.



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