

Flint, Michigan fire kills four children

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Four children, aged one, two, three, four, died when a huge blazing fire consumed their apartment Saturday evening in Flint, Michigan

The closest fire station was recently closed due to budget cuts in the depressed town, once a center of the auto industry and the birthplace of the United Auto Workers. The extra response time may have cost these children their lives, according to fire department officials. By the time fire officials arrived, the apartment was fully engulfed in flames.

The apartment building also lacked functioning smoke detectors, according to media reports. The Flint Housing Committee, a public agency, runs it.

The 28-year-old father of one of the deceased children and babysitter to the others apparently fell asleep while cooking and was awakened by a neighbor after the fire began. He managed to escape out of a first floor window, but was unable to save the children who were in a bedroom on the second floor of the apartment, above the kitchen.

According to the Flint Fire Department, the fire took place around 11 pm in the kitchen of Nakia Wiley's apartment. Nakia lost two children—Nakyrh, 4, and Dekari, 1—and a grandchild, Karrie, 2, in the fire.

"I don't know what I am going to do without them," said Wiley. "I've lost everything."

The names of the 3-year-old child and her father have not been released.

Flint Fire Department Battalion Chief Theresa Root, in an extraordinary interview at the scene of the fire, told the media that cuts to the fire department prevented

firefighters from getting to the fire in a timely manner.

"A neighbor started banging on the door to wake him up," Root told a local ABC news station. The reporter asked Root, who was in charge of the crew at the fire, if anything was done to try to get the children out of the apartment. (For the interview, [click here](#))

Root, visibly shaken with the fire still blazing behind her said, "To my knowledge just the knock on the door. But people were yelling.... There was a young girl at the window and they were crying and screaming and the neighbors were trying to get her to jump."

The exchange between the battalion chief and the reporter is an indictment of the destruction of public services in this former booming manufacturing center.

Reporter: "I want to ask you about your situation. Did you have a problem with the hydrants because of the cold? Anything like that?"

Root: "I'll tell you, we didn't have any problems with the hydrants this time. Our only problem really is the resources and personnel. Station 4 was closed so it has taken longer to get here. It took us 7 minutes to get to the scene.

Reporter: "Could that make a difference in maybe saving lives out here?"

Root: "That's a very big difference. Every 30 seconds a fire doubles. And in 3-4 minutes you could have a full structure ... house ... the inside structure fully involved in flames. So this ... (pointing to the fire) in 7 minutes."

"The problem was that the fire had a gigantic head

start,” another Flint Fire Department Chief Andy Graves said. “It had already developed significantly before we had gotten there.”

The fire damaged or destroyed six units of the two-story apartment building. The building is part of a sprawling public housing complex for low-income families.

One report states that there was no smoke detector in the home. Flint Housing Committee Executive Director Rob Slaughter, who claims that the detectors were disabled during the rescue, disputed this.

However, in a public housing facility there is no reason why automatic detectors and sprinklers could not have been installed. It is also not clear why the detector did not wake up the sitter if it was functioning.

Flint has been devastated by the closure of plants by GM. From 80,000 GM jobs in 1970, the city only has 8,000 today. Flint, tied with Kalamazoo, has the highest poverty rate of a major city in Michigan, at 35.5 percent. The poverty rate for African-Americans in this area of Flint is 42.9 percent.



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