

Chicago apartment fires kill and injure multiple residents, leave scores homeless

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One of a startling number of recent fires in the Chicago area has claimed the life of a young child. In the past two weeks, major fires have displaced families, injured residents and firefighters, killed family pets, and left scores homeless.

An apartment building fire in the Pilsen neighborhood November 7 killed 3-year-old Michael Cruz and injured his one-year-old sister as well as his father, who was knocked unconscious when a part of a ceiling fell onto him as he attempted to rescue his son. Two firefighters were also injured during rescue efforts.

At least 13 members of the Cruz family had been living in the building and now have no place to go. Survivors said they had no insurance and have depended on the outpouring of charity by neighbors.

On the same day, 100 firefighters were on site to battle a massive apartment building fire in Rogers Park. The blaze left 55 people homeless, including 21 children. The three-story building, which contained only 12 apartments, was rendered uninhabitable. Residents were directed to seek charity aid from the local Red Cross.

Earlier the same day, a fire at a parks district building in suburban Glenview hospitalized five firefighters.

In the early hours of November 11, a fire consumed a Humboldt Park home, injuring three people.

On October 28, a blaze in an apartment building on Garfield Boulevard was raised to a 2-11 alarm fire, due to strong winds and high risk of the fire spreading.

On Sunday, November 14, a fire in the western suburb of Batavia broke out, leaving a home uninhabitable. Gusting winds fed the flames and threatened to spread to neighboring properties. Eight regional fire departments were needed to respond to the blaze, which had completely engulfed the house and spread 20 feet across the driveway before firefighters

arrived on the scene.

While no cause for even a single one of the fires has been reported, there are several common contributing factors to fatal residential fires, particularly as temperatures drop, including the use of unsafe space heaters or other sources of warmth, aged building materials and electrical wiring, overcrowded living arrangements. A large segment of the working class population in Chicago are subject to these conditions. Family members have reported that the fire in Pilsen may have been related to a heater.

There is little doubt that Illinois's longstanding budget shortages have strained local fire departments in the Chicago metro area. More budget cuts to emergency services are looming. As the state budget crisis has compounded, with the shortfall now estimated by state officials to reach a record \$17 billion, lawmakers are seeking to cut costs anywhere that does not likely threaten a flight of capital from the state.

As part of a major attack on public services in the city, the Chicago Inspector General's office has recommended cuts to fire services for 2011 by reducing the number of fire professionals staffing a truck from five to four. The cuts would amount to some \$66 million annually.

Chicago Fire Commissioner Robert Hoff testified at a City Hall budget hearing October 26 that cuts to fire department funding would directly endanger residents. "In basic terms, it means lives could be lost, that of civilians and firefighters," Hoff warned. "Fires are going to grow faster because we're not getting water on it fast enough—property damage is going to skyrocket."

In an October 28 letter to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Tom Ryan, the president of the Chicago Firefighters

Union Local 2, similarly warned against the cuts. The 2010 National Fire Protection Association Standard recommends five or six on-duty members attending fires battled in “high-target hazard communities.”

Four firefighters per truck is not an adequate number of responders to handle large apartment home fires, Ryan wrote. “Virtually every ward in Chicago has high-target hazards such as high-rises, high-risk residential occupancies, nursing homes, schools, hospitals, industrial and manufacturing complexes, factories, subway and elevated train systems.”



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