

House fires claim 30 lives around the US

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The seven days from January 11 through January 17 have claimed the lives of over 30 people and scores of others have been left homeless by house fires. Most of the blazes were the result of faulty electrical systems, space heaters and other unsafe attempts by residents to stay warm as the cost of home heating continues to rise.

On January 11, three adults died in an early morning house fire in James City County, which is near Williamsburg, Virginia. Faulty electrical wiring was the cause. The combined effort of firefighters and police officers helped one person escape from a second story window. Another person, already deceased, was removed from the stairs of the building. The collapse of portions of the second floor forced the firefighters to retreat, and further two bodies were found after the fire was extinguished.

James City County Fire Department District Chief Bob Ryalls said fire officials had to call the local power company soon after arriving because the lines were “arcing”—i.e., exposed wiring was causing sparking on power cables.

Investigators believe either a faulty light fixture or electrical wiring in a first floor room caused the fire. The home did not have functioning smoke alarms. By the time the adults on the second floor became aware of the fire, their exit to the stairs were blocked.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania a mother and her three children ages 8, 12 and 14 died in a house fire January 13. They had been forced to string extension cords from the first floor to the second floor to power space heaters because the home had no heat and the outlets on the second floor were not working.

The fire consumed the North Philadelphia home and damaged five other adjoining row houses. Neighbors reported that they heard screams coming from inside the house. The first call to 911 was at 1:28 am and firefighters arrived a few minutes later to find the first floor already engulfed in thick smoke. Firefighters had

trouble connecting hoses. The fire hydrant in front of the house was frozen and others were blocked by snow that had been plowed, slowing down the response.

The mother, Rasheedah Butts-Wilson, 33, was a day care worker and was planning to move her family into a home she had just bought. The house they were living in had only one smoke detector, located in the basement, which had no batteries. By the time they realized the home was ablaze, they had no way out.

A 57-year-old woman died in a fire also on January 13 in Terrytown, Louisiana, a suburb of New Orleans. Fire officials believe a space heater ignited bedding materials that started the blaze. The fire destroyed the four-apartment building, leaving the other families residing there homeless.

On January 14, an apartment fire near Houston, Texas left 80 to 100 people homeless after it gutted a 20-unit building, part of a larger apartment complex. Elizabeth Ramsey, 23, who is six months pregnant, called 911 after seeing smoke coming from the heating vents. Firefighters arrived and checked her apartment but found no signs of fire or heat. However, as they left the apartment building they saw smoke coming from the roof and evacuated all the units.

Most of the units on the second floor of the two-story building were completely destroyed, leaving the residents with nothing. The units on the first floor received heavy water and smoke damage, and are unlivable for now.

A 70-year-old cinderblock home burned down in a predawn blaze on Sunday, January 16. A father died in an attempt to save two of his sons, aged 3 and 4, in a fatal fire in Lexington County, South Carolina.

Patrick Kirby, 24, a cousin of the family who lived in the home, told reporters of *The State*, “He [the father] went back in to get the two boys and never came back out.”

Ethel Houston, 44, a relative who lives behind the

home in a trailer, said that her niece came and woke her up before 6 a.m., pounding on the door and screaming that the house was on fire.

Officials have not released the names of the victims and say that the cause is still under investigation. Ten people lived in the small house and had only kerosene and electric space heaters for heat.

An elderly mother and her son were killed in a house fire in Somerville, Massachusetts Monday, January 17. Fire officials say the fire was caused by a space heater in the front bedroom. Killed in the fire were Dorina Correia, an 80-year-old woman, and her son Louis Correia, 48. Dorina had apparently tried to escape but collapsed before she could get out.

Firefighters had trouble finding hydrants to combat the fire, with some hidden behind tall banks of snow and others frozen shut. However, fire officials claimed that the tank on the fire truck was sufficient in this case, and did not hamper the rescue effort.

Jennifer Mieth, a spokeswoman for the state Fire Marshal said, "We see space heater fires spike during cold snaps like this as people look for ways to stay warm."

Both fires and fatalities from fires are up in Massachusetts so far this year. Portable heaters have caused most of them. Red cross officials in Nebraska also report that house fires are above average this year.

Across the country, heating is the second major cause of house fires, following electrical problems. Of these residential blazes, portable heaters are responsible for 74 percent. Facing rising costs for gas, electricity and deliverable fuels, many families try to save money by only heating one room in a house. In many cases, as happens in Detroit, households are forced to jury-rig connections to outside power lines because utility companies have terminated their service for non-payment. In addition to fire deaths, many suffer long-term physical consequences from living without adequate heat. In other instances, families cut back on necessities like food and medication in an effort to keep their gas and/or electricity on.

The following is a list of further fire deaths from January 11 through the 17:

January 11—A man was killed in a house fire in Marinette County, Wisconsin.

January 12—Two people died in a house fire in Kalispell, Montana.

January 14—In Taunton, Massachusetts, a man was killed in a house fire; an elderly man could not escape a fire in his Vacaville, California home; in Albany, New York, an elderly man died when his house caught fire and he was unable to escape;

January 15—In Oklahoma City, one person was killed and two injured in a fire; one person was killed in a house fire in Plant City, Florida; in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a woman was killed in her apartment fire; in Chesterfield, Indiana, an elderly woman was killed.

January 16—In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, an elderly woman was killed in an apartment fire; in Alcoa, Tennessee, a man was killed in an apartment fire; in Saugus, Massachusetts a 53-year-old man was killed in a house fire.

January 17—In Shaftsbury, Vermont, two elderly people were killed in a house fire; in Evansville, Indiana, an elderly man was killed in a house fire; in Pompano Beach, Florida, a man was killed in an apartment fire; in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a woman was killed when her oxygen tank caught on fire.



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