

Unemployed Detroit woman dies in house fire

Poverty, space heaters and steel bars: a common deadly mix

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Early Thursday morning, January 27, a 49-year-old unemployed nurse died in a house fire on Detroit's east side. Irene Smith Spencer reportedly suffered from ill health and was on disability benefits, which are notoriously inadequate and generally guarantee poverty. She was using space heaters after her furnace had gone out, according to neighbors and friends.

Spencer lived on the 12000 block of Nashville, a tidy, working class neighborhood reminiscent of what Detroit looked like in the 1970s before the massive auto layoffs began. Despite her early death, Irene Spencer was the only member of her family left and lived alone with three dogs and a cat. "All of her kids died before her," stated Elaine Mills, Spencer's sister. Only one dog escaped the fire.

Mills told the WSWWS, "She tried to get out of the house. She was found on the floor at the front door just inside of the house, but just couldn't make it out." Rescuers took Spencer to a nearby hospital in an attempt to save her life; however, she was pronounced dead on arrival.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation. In one report a neighbor said Spencer's utilities had been off and she was using a stove and space heaters for heat. DTE Energy, the local utility company, said both of Spencer's utilities, gas and electric, had been on since 2009.

Mills said she understood the cause of the fire was faulty wiring in the basement. "She had her utilities on. The problem was with the electrical connection." A neighbor, Steven Harris, who is also a heating and cooling specialist, said the probable cause of the fire was an overloaded electrical unit from the space heater.

"Her furnace was out," stated Harris. "She was using space heaters for heat in the house and the electricity became overloaded. I wish she had called me about the problem. I would have been able to help her. She was a beautiful woman, inside and out," he said.

"I feel really bad for her and the family," Harris added. "She is the type of person who gave you help when you needed it. That's why I am here now, to help the family in any way I can."

Fire officials said they were called to the house after receiving a 911 call from a neighbor, but had difficulty getting into the house because of the steel reinforced door. Spencer was found on the floor with the key inside the lock, indicating she was unable to open the door and was overcome by smoke.

In recent years some states have adopted regulations on the security bars and grates over windows and doors, which are pervasive in poor inner-city neighborhoods, to ensure they can be opened in the case of an emergency. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), an international nonprofit organization established in 1896, even when these rules exist they are not enforced. NFPA has recommended local building inspectors and firefighters conduct door-to-door inspections to identify security bars that fail to have release mechanisms.

The extreme danger of residents being unable to escape house fires because of security devices is well documented and led to the deaths of seven children in Detroit in the 1993 Mack Avenue Fire. The release mechanisms cost about \$60 each on new bars and \$100 for existing bars. They were missing at Irene Spencer's home and the cost is out of reach for most Detroit homeowners.

Detroit Fire Battalion Chief Gary Strizinger stated,

“Those bars are really bad. They protect you from B&Es [break and enterings], but they keep you from getting out in the case of a fire.” With cuts to all firefighting battalions, not to mention reductions in state inspectors, preventative safety visits to homes do not take place.

Moreover, the use of space heaters—which are cheap and available—is highly risky and extremely common. According to the NFPA, space heaters are the second leading cause of household fires in the US after cooking, and the second leading cause of overall fires after smoking.

A report by NFPA issued in 2010, “Space heaters involved in 79 percent of fatal home fires,” states that while space heaters are responsible for 32 percent of house fires in the US, they are responsible for 79 percent of heating fire deaths.

In 2010, many of the fatal household fires where utilities were turned off involved space heaters, including the fire that killed Marvin and Tyrone Allen, as well as Lynn Greer on Dexter Avenue, and the three children of Sylvia Young. Workers often turn to the use of space heaters because they have no other source of heat.



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