

Detroit house fire kills child, injures another

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An intense house fire erupted around 11 a.m. on April 21 in a home on Detroit's northeast side, killing a four-year child and sending her five-year-old brother to the hospital in critical condition for smoke inhalation.

The 90-year-old wooden structure is in a working class neighborhood near Hamtramck, an enclave inside Detroit home to people of many different ethnicities. Neighbors—black, white and Yemeni— rushed to the family's aid.

According to the Detroit Fire Department, the fire that engulfed the house on the 13200 block of Buffalo street began in the front living room. Fire Captain Frank Maiorana said the two adults in the home, a 16-year-old baby sitter and a father with a third child, a six-month-old infant, ran out of the home. They later went back inside to look for the other two children, after they realized they were still inside.

"The fire was too intense," said Captain Maiorana. "They could not find the children. They were found later by the firefighters in the back bedroom," he explained.

Firefighters took the three children and the babysitter to the hospital. Four-year-old Sawal Algamaai died while in the hospital. Her brother, five-year-old Mahib Algamaai, is in critical condition. The babysitter, 16-year-old Iesha Zimdani, was treated and released along with six-month-old Eliam Alsharf.

Zaid Alsharf lived in the home with his six-month-old son. The children injured in the fire were relatives visiting for the night. Their mother was in school and their father was working. Both Zaid and Iesha were asleep when the fire erupted.

"I lost everything that I have," stated Alsharf.

Several of the neighbors tried desperately to save the

two children after they saw the fire and heard screams for help. The WSWs spoke to neighbors who described their desperate actions.

"We saw the flames and the young girl saying children were in the house," stated Edward Pollard, 22. Pollard lives on the next block. He, along with friends and relatives of the family, tried to get into the front door but the flames were too intense.

Edres Alkuhleri, a relative who lives next door, said they worked together to try to get the children out of the house. Edres cut his eye with flying glass when he broke a window. Toney Smith, another neighbor, said they went to the back door and tried to kick it in.

Sonya White, who also lives in the area, was distraught when she heard the four-year-old had died.

"I know those kids," stated White. "My son is in the same class as Sawal. She was so quiet and polite, just a real sweet child. She was one of my son's best friends. It doesn't matter to us what the ethnic background is. We all feel this."

"Last week they had their spring concert," noted White, wondering how she would explain to her son the loss of his playmate.

"Once the window broke and [the fire] got oxygen, it really took off," stated Captain Maiorana, who was at the scene of the fire. "These are old houses with a lot of wood," he continued. "With the furniture in the living room, it had a lot of fuel."

On the day of the fire, the nearest fire station one mile away had been "browned out"; it was closed in a policy of rotating station closures instituted by the city government as a part of its budget cuts.

Interim Fire Commissioner Fred Wheeler said the station that responded did so within the national standard of four minutes from the time of dispatch.

By all accounts from the neighbors, the firefighters worked hard to save the children, even in the face of limited resources as the result of years of budget cuts.

The Detroit Fire Department has ruled the cause of the fire to be undetermined. Captain Maiorana said that so far they have ruled out arson or a utility shutoff. Both are common problems in Detroit, due to the growth of poverty and thousands of abandoned buildings throughout the city.

Maiorana said the house had a smoke detector but no batteries in the device. “That alone could have made a difference in saving the children,” he said.

The Detroit Fire Department said that this fire death is the third fatality involving a child so far this year. Ten adults have also perished in blazes since the start of 2011.



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