House fire caused by space heater kills three in Ohio

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30 December 2011

A house fire that killed three people in Columbus, Ohio the night of Christmas Eve was caused by a space heater, used by the family after gas was cut off from their home. The heater ignited the mattress they were sleeping on.

Killed in the blaze were 22-year-old Jerrica Francisco, her four-year-old son Deshawn, and 33-year-old Demetrius Chappell.

The family lived in appalling poverty. Jerrica Francisco paid rent on the home, which had been declared uninhabitable in 2009, but was given no lease. Residents in the neighborhood of Franklinton, on the city's west side, thought the house was vacant. Before moving in, the family had been living in their car.

The house had no kitchen appliances and was without a functioning water heater. Electrical wiring was defective, the plumbing leaked, and the water was contaminated, according to city building code records.

Columbia Gas disconnected natural gas service on the day of the fire, after the furnace malfunctioned, leaving the family in the cold on Christmas. Fire investigators said the electricity may also have been shut off.

At the time of the fire, all had been huddled together on a single mattress on the living room floor, attempting to keep warm with a space heater. Investigators said all of the family's belongings were contained in that one room.

Columbus Fire Battalion Chief Michael Fowler said that after the mattress caught fire Chappell awoke and tried to remove it to protect the child and his mother, who was wheelchair-bound with muscular dystrophy.

The effort to protect the family only fed the flames by exposing the smoldering fabric to oxygen. The intensity of the fire apparently overwhelmed Chappell before he could get the mattress out the door.

"We're ruling the fire as accidental," Fowler told the media. "We believe that Mr. Chappell was actually trying to save them when everybody got caught and couldn't get out." When firefighters recovered the bodies of the victims, all were near the blocked doorway, the child holding onto Chappell's leg.

Relatives and neighbors of the victims were grief-stricken and angry over the conditions that led to the tragedy. Residents piled up stuffed toys and poinsettias at the doorway where the family died.

"I'm angry at the landlord for renting this house out to anyone, especially someone that has a disability," Jerry Moss, brother of Jerrica Francisco, told local news channel NBC4. "They were paying rent for this house, and she used most of her monthly disability check to pay it."

"I don't want to spend Christmas no more," he said. "It's not the same. I just lost my big sister and my little nephew on Christmas Day. Christmas will never be the same. When I got that call at 9:30 this morning, it didn't even feel like Christmas no more. I thought I was still sleeping. I wanted to wake up."

"I would say this house should not have been rented," said Darryl Miller, uncle of Demetrius Chappell. "I just think it was unlivable conditions."

The situation is far from unusual in the Franklinton neighborhood. The street is lined with badly deteriorating Victorian-style homes. Across the intersection from the Francisco's home, a 2006 house fire claimed the lives of a 19-year-old mother and her three young children. "That's the worst… the babies," neighbor Debra Hunt said. "They don't deserve that, and if the landlords would keep their property up, these things wouldn't happen."

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"I thought, 'Damn. That could have been us," Barb Farrell told the *Columbus Dispatch*. Farrell lives in a rental with her fiancé and two young children that is owned by the same landlord who let to the Franciscos. Farrell said she also relies on space heaters for warmth, and their house has likewise been ordered vacated by the city.

The landlord, Sam Vazirani, owns at least 20 other houses in the city, most in Franklinton. He has not been charged; if he were prosecuted for ignoring the city's order to vacate the property, he would face no more than 60 days in jail and a $500 fine—less than the cost of one month's rent.

Columbus Department of Building and Zoning Services deputy director Scott Messer defended the city's inaction on enforcing the orders. "We don't have the ability to sit 24/7 and watch every property in the city," he told the *Dispatch*.

Since July, over 225 families have been affected by fires in Columbus' Franklin County. In the month of December alone, 28 families have been dislocated by house fires. Five Columbus residents, three of them children, have been killed this month.

City records indicate that 20 people have died in fires in the Franklinton neighborhood in the past decade.

Countless century-old homes throughout the city have been converted into rentals, many owned by absentee landlords and allowed to fall into disrepair. Many have exposed and outdated cloth-cord electrical wiring, along with dry-rot in the mostly wooden frames.

Poor families, strained by exorbitant housing and utility costs, resort to heating their homes with space heaters, ovens, or other unsafe sources of warmth.

The tragedy is all but certain to be repeated through the winter months, as the Obama administration cuts federal utility assistance funding. The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is targeted for a billion-dollar cut, to $3.4 billion—a 33 percent reduction from 2009.

Over that period, Ohio's HEAP budget has shrunk from $245 million to $165 million. The state's utility assistance program provides a one-time payment of only $175 for low-income families. At the same time, requests for utility help have risen from 393,000 families to 458,000 this year. The majority of HEAP recipients are elderly, disabled, or families with young children living far below the poverty line.

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