

Chicago officials deny antiquated fire code caused woman's death

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18 January 2012

Shantel McCoy, 32, was killed in a high-rise apartment fire early in the morning on January 8th. The Chicago woman died in the building's elevator at approximately 2:00 a.m. while she was returning to her apartment after buying food.

Unaware of the blaze that raged on the 12th floor of the building, which had by the time she returned engulfed the entire floor, McCoy was immediately overwhelmed by smoke, toxic fumes, and flames when the elevator doors opened.

Seven additional building residents and two Chicago firefighters were injured in the fire, which began in an apartment unit on the 12th floor of the 21-floor building and quickly spread through the apartment's open door.

Basic features of modern fire codes would have saved McCoy's life. Unlike buildings built after 1975, this high-rise's elevators do not stop working when a smoke detector is activated, nor is there a building-wide alert system. The apartment building, located at 3130 North Lake Shore Drive in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, was outfitted with neither a sprinkler system nor a building-wide fire alarm system. Residents living above and below the 12th floor where the fire started confirmed that they did not hear any fire alarms going off at the time.

Commercial residential buildings in Chicago built before 1975 are not required to have sprinkler systems installed. Because the costs to retrofit older buildings with a sprinkler system were deemed too expensive by building owners, older buildings such as 3130 N. Lake Shore Drive were exempted from the 2004 city ordinance requiring that pre-1975 commercial buildings have sprinkler systems installed. More than 750 residential high-rises are exempt from having these basic fire safety systems.

This exemption was given by the city on the grounds

that older apartment buildings would be evaluated for cheaper safety improvements as part of a "building fire safety plan" that was initially required to be implemented by January 1, 2012. Last December, Chicago's city council voted unanimously to extend the deadline for building owners to have installed the required building safety measures to January 1, 2015. As a result, at the time of the fire on January 8, the building was not required to have updated its fire alarm system or a fire-safe elevator system.

The 2004 ordinance was passed in response to the 2003 fire in the Cook County Administration Building that killed six people who had become trapped in the stairway after automatic door locks prevented them from getting to safety. The six had been ordered by firefighters to return to their floors above the fire after they attempted to evacuate the building.

McCoy's family stated that she had moved to Chicago last March hoping to find work after being laid off from her previous job at an accounting firm in Philadelphia. Her tragic and completely preventable death is a direct result of the city's decision to serve the interests of property owners at the expense of the health and safety of the population.

Despite the absence of basic fire safety measures in the building and their central role in McCoy's death, city officials have heaped blame for her death on the couple in whose apartment the fire began.

Deputy District Fire Chief Joseph Roccasalva emphasized that the fleeing couple's decision to prop their apartment door open to let their pets escape "doomed" Shantel McCoy. Chicago businessman and alderman Tom Tunney, who co-sponsored the ordinance that extended the building fire safety deadline, said that McCoy's death was "unrelated" to the extension and absence of modern building fire

precautions, noting, “The important thing is this door did not close.”

Tunney said he had “no regrets” about championing the three-year extension sparing building owners from implementing safety measures.

Charles Buckman, an elevator industry specialist commenting on McCoy’s death, said that if the national engineering code had been observed, fire sensors would be installed on each floor and the elevator would not have been operating normally.

About the lack of elevator safety measures in the building he said, “In this case, somebody committed murder.”



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