

West Virginia house fire kills nine

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A house fire in Charleston, West Virginia early Saturday morning left nine dead, including seven children between the ages of one and eight. The two-story home had only one smoke alarm, which was nonfunctioning and improperly placed under a kitchen counter.

Charleston Mayor Danny Jones said it was the worst house fire in the city's history. According to Charleston Assistant Fire Chief Bob Sharp, the fire is the deadliest in the city since the devastating Woolworth department store fire of 1949, which claimed the lives of seven firefighters.

Two adult sisters lived in the wood-frame home at 2 Arlington Ave. with their seven children. Alisha "Lisa" Carter-Camp, 26, and her boyfriend Alex Seal were the two adults killed in the fire. Lisa's younger sister, Latasha Jones Isabelle, 24, was able to escape the house without injuries. She ran and called to report the fire from a neighbor's house at around 3:30 a.m. Saturday morning.

When firefighters arrived the house was engulfed in flames. The blaze was reduced quickly, according to Sharp.

Six of the seven children, ranging in ages from 18 months to three years, were found dead in the home by firefighters. They included Keahna Camp, Jeremiah Camp, Elijah Scott, and Kiki, Gigi and Emanuel Jones.

The seventh child, seven-year-old Bryan Timothy Camp survived, but was left brain dead with severe burns. The child was placed on life support in an intensive care unit at Charleston Area Medical Center. The family decided to take him off life support Sunday morning, bringing the death toll from the fire to nine.

The group had gathered Friday night to celebrate Lisa's 26th birthday on Saturday.

The cause of the fire is under investigation but is believed to have started in the middle of the home's main level. No foul play is suspected at this point, but

Kanawha County Prosecutor Mark Plants said there will be a criminal investigation by his office and investigators from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were also due to arrive at the scene.

According to Mayor Jones, the victims "didn't have a chance... There were no smoke detectors in the bedroom, anywhere in the house. That means people couldn't have been alerted." Sharp noted that all the deaths appeared to be from smoke inhalation and that the bodies were found in sleeping positions.

Neighbors said that the two families living there had moved in only a few months earlier. It has been reported that the home is a rental property subsidized through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which is owned and maintained by a local landlord, Delores Shamblin of Mammoth.

The city code requires multiple smoke detectors in the house. At a press conference, Mayor Jones claimed that a city building inspector had attempted to inspect the home on February 28, but was turned away by one of the children because Lisa was not home at the time.

While it is unknown at this point what caused the fire, the dire social conditions that turned it into a tragedy are clear.

In many cities, public funding through HUD enables private rental companies and individual slumlords to pocket considerable sums of money while providing inadequate and often dangerous housing to the poorest and most desperate sections of the working class. Insufficient building codes and inspectors coupled with often budget-strapped building departments play a role in allowing such deathtraps to be inhabited.

Details have yet to emerge concerning the operations of landlord Delores Shamblin, but it is clear that she was renting a property that had inadequate fire safety measures. There is no excuse for having no operable smoke detectors in a rental property given that they are

widely available and relatively inexpensive.

That the victims died of smoke inhalation while sleeping shows that these deaths were completely avoidable had the most basic safety measures been present.

The fact that two families, 10 people, were living in one house also has social origins. It has been reported that Lisa worked as a desk clerk at the local Holiday Inn Express, a position that frequently pays only minimum wage. Financial limitations likely drove the two sisters to share housing arrangements.

Employment opportunities in West Virginia have stagnated over the past three decades. In 2010, the median-wage worker in the state earned \$0.64 less an hour than his or her national counterpart and \$0.28 less than the median-wage worker in West Virginia in 1979, when adjusted for inflation.

Deteriorating social conditions disproportionately affect the most vulnerable sections of the population, including single mothers and children.

Lisa's desk job at the local hotel most certainly was not paying her the 2010 median-wage of \$15.36 an hour. She held one of the state's many low-wage jobs, which are in occupations with median annual pay below the federal poverty threshold. More than one in every three jobs in the state falls into this low-wage category. West Virginia has the greatest percentage of low-wage jobs in the nation and ranks among the poorest in terms of per capita income.

The lives of the young mothers point to other social indicators. Lisa turned 26 on Saturday, and died with her oldest child Keahna, age 8. Thus, Lisa became pregnant some time around 17 years of age. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, West Virginia was the only state to have an increase in teen pregnancies between 2007 and 2009. This is part of a longer-term problem in the state, with teen birthrates rising nearly 11 percent since 2005, according to data from the Kids Count initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

A recent report on the sexual health of young people in the South determined that the higher teen birthrate in places like West Virginia was the result of high poverty, poor sexual health, and low educational attainment of women. It also noted that despite the fact that some 90 percent of Southerners support sexual health education in public schools, the federal

government has almost exclusively funded abstinence-only programs.

The combination of these conditions is what drives the soaring child poverty rate in West Virginia. A total of 93,421 children—or one in every four—were living in poverty in the state in 2010. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, there are more than 8,300 homeless children in West Virginia.



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