

Spate of fires kills eight in Philadelphia

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Three fires in less than a week have claimed eight lives in Philadelphia. The tragedies are an indictment of the dilapidated social conditions that confront millions of working class families across the country.

On Monday, a fire ripped through a West Philadelphia row house, killing two young children, their mother and grandfather. The blaze erupted sometime before 5 a.m., as the family slept. No working smoke detectors were found in the home, fire officials said.

Firefighters managed to get the fire under control after 38 minutes. Two-year-old Jayden and 4-year-old Cyncere McClendon were hospitalized with burns to 100 percent of their bodies. Medics said they perished at the hospital.

Grandfather Seneca “Chuck” McClendon, 75, also died at the hospital. He was a retired postal worker beloved by the neighborhood and referred to by neighbors as “Mr. Chuck.” The elderly gentleman tended flowers in his yard and swept the entire block clean each morning, neighbors said.

The boys’ mother, Rishya Jenkins, was pronounced dead at the scene. All four were trapped on the second floor and unable to escape.

Anthony McClendon, the 25-year-old father of the children and the son of Chuck, arrived home from a double shift at work to find the house engulfed in flames. “They had to restrain him because he was trying to get in to save his family,” a neighbor told local news station WPVI. “I admired his efforts; I watched him grow up. But he could not get in because the flames were really bad at that point.”

Witnesses said that Anthony was so overcome with grief that he had to be hospitalized. “They were all that he had,” another neighbor said.

Neighbors were devastated by the tragedy. “I’m still crying on the inside. I’ll never stop crying,” Debra Forrest, a relative of the family who lives nearby, told the local news.

“I’m devastated,” said Lewis Divers, a neighbor who Chuck McClendon had looked after during hard times. “I loved Chuck, and the kids. They was good people, man,

trust me.”

Just 24 hours earlier, a little girl and her great-grandmother were killed in a North Philadelphia row house fire. Ardalia Bumpus, 79, and 4-year-old Nevaeh Bryant were trapped in a second-floor bedroom after a kitchen fire broke out shortly after midnight.

The victims were two of seven members of an extended family living together in the home. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the fire broke out after 19-year-old Nikia Craig fell asleep waiting for a pot of grease to heat. The teen had gotten off work from a long shift at 11 p.m., and was preparing to fry some onion rings for herself when she drifted off in exhaustion while sitting up on a couch. “It was my fault,” she told the paper the following day. “...I fell asleep. It had to happen so quick.”

Craig said she was awakened by her uncle, who told her to run and get her two sleeping nieces. She ran upstairs, where she found Nevaeh and one-year-old Allura sleeping in a bed together. She said she carried the baby and grabbed the toddler by the collar to prompt her to run, but after rushing down the stairs, she realized the child was not behind her. Instead, the 4-year-old had run into another bedroom where her great-grandmother was sleeping.

By that time, the fire was raging too intensely for family members to re-enter the house. Neighbors said Craig smashed through two first floor windows with her bare hands trying to get back inside.

On Monday, April 10, two firefighters died battling a five-alarm fire at a vacant warehouse in Philadelphia’s Kensington neighborhood. The firefighters were killed in a wall collapse half an hour after they had gotten the blaze under control.

Four firefighters with Ladder 10 company were buried under tons of rubble. Lt. Robert P. Neary, a 37-year veteran of the department, and Daniel Sweeney, a 25-year-old firefighter with five years’ experience, were killed. Both had received numerous decorations for saving people from burning buildings.

Of the two others injured in the collapse, 25-year-old

Pat Nally remains hospitalized in an intensive care unit “in guarded condition,” Fire Commissioner Lloyd Ayers said Monday. Nally required CPR at the scene of the accident.

The fire was reported at 3:13 a.m. and intensified over the next hour under windy conditions. Six houses and an adjacent furniture store also caught fire. The fire department rushed to evacuate 31 nearby homes, fearful that the inferno could spiral out of control.

As one resident several blocks away described the scene, “The embers were going right over our heads. You stood here, you saw it dropping all over the place, setting things on fire as it fell out of the sky.” On another street, windows were blown out of half of the houses on the block, blanketing the sidewalks with glass.

The five-story building, an old garment factory, was owned by three New York-based real estate developers and left to deteriorate. Neighbors had repeatedly implored the city to enforce safety codes out of fear that the enormous, city-block-sized brick building would catch fire from homeless squatters living inside.

Michael, Nahman, and Yechiel Lichtenstein, the real estate developers who own the building, insist that the building was being maintained. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* notes that the Lichtensteins, who own as many as 33 other buildings in Philadelphia under various corporate names, owe the city nearly \$60,000 in back taxes and \$12,000 in water and sewer bills. The city administration has vowed to pursue a legal inquiry.

Many residents have recognized that no small part of the blame for the fire lies with the city. “We knew this was going to happen,” East Kensington Neighbors Association president Jeff Carpineta commented. “One by one, all the old textile mills in this neighborhood are burning down, and this city is not taking steps to deal with it.”

“If owners don’t feel financial pain or the threat of losing their properties, I don’t think anything is going to change,” Northern Liberties Neighbors Association president Matt Ruben said.

The city’s managing director, Richard Negrin, told the *Inquirer*, “This is a problem 75 years in the making. We’re an aging, old, manufacturing city that’s going through a transformation. We’re not going to fix this in short order, and we’re not going to do it with a sort of magic solution.”

A study of records by the paper found that Philadelphia has “historically taken much longer to foreclose” than other cities on delinquent landlords, “creating a culture of

nonpayment that is a reason one in five properties is tax-delinquent. That rate is far higher than in any other major US municipality...”

The economic crisis has deepened the blight and dangerous conditions that have long plagued the city. Philadelphia has seen a marked decline in its housing market over the past seven years, according to data recently compiled by the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Philadelphia Research Initiative. Existing home sales have dropped every year, down 59 percent since 2005.

Some 40,000 properties now stand vacant. Many residential and commercial structures are well over a century old. Given the combination of severe poverty, widespread utility shutoffs, and decrepit water and electrical infrastructure make fatal fires are all too common.

Such disasters disproportionately beset the poorest families. Thousands live doubled up with relatives in cramped apartments, often subsisting on single incomes and living without basic utilities.

Although the official unemployment rate in Philadelphia stands at 10.5 percent, above the national average, a closer look at the employment data reveals an even starker reality. The percentage of Philadelphians of working age classified as “not in the labor force” is 42.1 percent—one of the highest rates of any major city. Many of those who do have work are stuck in low-wage jobs, pulling long shifts to make ends meet.

More than one in four Philadelphians live below the poverty line, and one in three families with children are poor. Across the country, only Detroit and Cleveland have higher official rates of poverty among major cities.



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