Five deaths in Baltimore row house fire

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A house fire claimed the lives of five Baltimore residents in the early hours Thursday morning. Firefighters reported a blaze at 2 a.m. in the 5600 block of Denwood Avenue, in northeast Baltimore, home to many lower-income and working class residents.

While early accounts failed to give the identities of the victims, reports eventually revealed that four of the five dead were children, the youngest being only one year old. The sole adult killed in the fire was reportedly 53-year-old Nancy Worrell, the grandmother of several of the children.

Although firefighters arrived on the scene quickly, the blaze took the greater part of two hours to extinguish. The cause of the fire still remains undetermined. "[There were] intense flames coming out of every window and door in this structure," explained Fire Chief Kevin Cartwright, "It looked like an inferno, and it's surprising that anyone survived in this fire."

Family members and nearby residents were aggrieved at the tragedy. "My heart is hurting," said Debbie Boyd, Nancy Worrell's sister. Others injured in the calamity were two firefighters who fell through a floor while fighting the blaze, as well as a man, later identified as a family relation, who leaped from a second-floor window to avoid death.

The Denwood Avenue house is located in an area of east Baltimore blighted by economic woes and marked by rows of abandoned houses, similar to neighborhoods in many of America's former industrial centers. Unemployment, poor wages and declining social services dominate the lives of many people here.

Rick Hoffman, president of Firefighters Local 704 in Baltimore, released a statement pointing to budget cuts as partly to blame for the tragedy. "A non-arguable point," said Hoffman, "is that the Baltimore City Fire Department is doing a lot more with fewer resources and is spread too thin."

In July of this year Squad 11 and Truck 15 were disbanded and removed from use. This was said to have "fixed" the issue of rotating closures that the city had resorted to as a cost-saving measure.

Maryland has been hard hit during the current recession and Baltimore, once known for its heavy industry, primarily steel, has seen living standards deteriorate. A report in late April released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation showed that of the jobs created in the city from 1980 to 2007, over 60 percent were described as "low-wage" and only 10 percent were considered high-paying.

The report's findings, in other words, covered the period immediately prior to the 2008 financial crash and subsequent slump. Thus, it emphasized that living standards in Baltimore had been in serious decline long before the most recent economic downturn.

Other deadly fires have occurred in the city recently, one only last month in which an 88-year-old woman perished in the 2200 block of East North Avenue, also in east Baltimore. Two days earlier, Reginald Russell, 73, was found in the entryway of his home. He had died attempting to fight his way out of his home during a fire in the 1500 block of Holbrook Street, also in the eastern part of the city. The two episodes were the fourth and fifth such tragedies that year, the *Baltimore Sun* reported.

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