

Four perish in Maryland house fire

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On Thursday, February 21, a house fire claimed the lives of three children and one adult in the working class Washington, D.C., suburb of Glenarden, Maryland. According to Prince George's County Fire officials, a family of six was inside the single-story brick house on the 8600 block of Leslie Avenue when the fire began at roughly 4 a.m.

The deceased were identified as Darrell Terrance Price Jr., 36, Tania Monae Jeanita Price, 8, and Patrice Price, 4. The fourth victim, Daijah Price, 11, died late Friday night at Children's National Medical Center in Washington. The mother, Teresa Price, 33, and Tamia Price, 8, were the only survivors. They escaped through a window and alerted neighbors for assistance. Both were hospitalized for smoke inhalation.

Firefighters arrived on the scene within five minutes of the first 911 call and pulled four unconscious family members, the father and three children, from the burning home. All in all, 75 EMS workers and firefighters took 30 minutes to control the blaze. "Flames and thick smoke were coming out of just about every window and door," explained Mark E. Brady, the chief spokesperson for Prince George's County Fire Department.

Though further tests are needed, a faulty electrical appliance is believed to be the cause of the blaze, fire investigators say. Authorities have also confirmed that there was no smoke detector in the house. The tragedy last Thursday brings the total fire-related deaths in Prince George's County to nine this year, already almost as many as the ten deaths recorded during all of 2012.

Friends and family were devastated by the loss. William Shorter, the girls' grandfather, lamented "My grandkids are gone. What am I supposed to say? I just had them with me Saturday, and they're gone."

The District of Columbia/Baltimore area has seen an increasing number of fire-related deaths in the recent

past. In the month of January, in Prince George's County alone, a house fire in Temple Hills took the life of Christine Miller, 83. Four days earlier, in the same county, Joseph Franklin Hoffman, 65, succumbed to cardiac arrest after having escaped his burning home.

Prince George's County, which according to a 2007 census ranked as one of the wealthiest majority-African American counties in the United States, is of a periphery of wealthy regions dotting the Washington, D.C., Metro area. Along with sharing a border with the District of Columbia itself, the area is near several of the top 10 wealthiest counties in the US. Despite this, the area is host to an increasingly large growth of poverty (see "Poverty grows in Washington DC suburbs").

As the cost of utilities rises and incomes fall, many people are turning to space heaters as a cheap way to stay warm during the winter season. This has led to an increasing instance of house fires across the country, many of which are concentrated in working class or impoverished areas. According to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), space heaters are the source of 21,800 house fires every year and can be attributed to 300 fire-related deaths.

Although the firefighters and EMS workers have been quick to respond to these emergencies, the Prince George's Fire Department has not escaped the effects of the 2008 financial meltdown and its attending recession. A budget crisis in the county precipitated cuts in overtime spending for firefighters by more than 75 percent. Before the cuts, the department had been paying out roughly \$250,000 in overtime for each two-week pay period. Beginning in 2009, that number was reduced to \$60,000. Over the past decade, the total number of career firefighters has dropped from around 800 to roughly 720.

In nearby Baltimore, this process has resulted in "rotating closures," or temporary idling of certain

stations, coupled with the more traditional means of eliminating staff and equipment as a means of coping with budgetary constraints (see “Five deaths in Baltimore row house fire”).

This trend of layoffs is reflected in the general unemployment level of Prince George’s County, which shot up nearly 5 percentage points between 2008 and 2010 from 3.3 percent to 8.1 percent. As of last November, the unemployment rate stands at 6.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Despite this relatively low unemployment level, roughly one quarter of the city of Glenarden’s predominantly African-American working class population lives under the poverty line.

Earlier this month, Prince George’s County executive Rushern Baker announced plans to close a \$152 million shortfall in the county’s budget. While details on the cuts have yet to be released, Baker has stated, “There will not be any department that will be spared.”



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