

Four children and two adults killed in Pennsylvania house fire

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Water service had been shut off two weeks before a tragic Mother's Day house fire took the lives of four children and two adults in the small town of Pottsville, Pennsylvania.

Those killed in the May 12 fire have been identified as Eric Brown, 30 and his four children: Elijah, 2; Emily, 3; Jeremiah, 7; and Joy, age 8. Another adult, Kristina Thomas, 26, also died in the fire. Kristina was the sister of 28-year-old Kelly Brown, the wife of Eric and the mother of the four children. Kelly Brown was at a neighbor's house washing laundry at the time.

Water service was turned off by the Pottsville Area Sewer Authority on April 24 or 25 according to an employee who did not want his name published. Water Authority officials have not returned calls to reporters, but the employee said the family paid \$109 of their bill on April 15, leaving a balance of \$412 on their water and sewer bill.

If the house was heated with a boiler, as is likely but not confirmed, then cutting off water service probably ended the family's access to heat. The family was reportedly using a wood burning stove for warmth. Temperatures dropped down to near freezing on the evening of the fire.

The fire broke out around 11:55 p.m. Sunday night. Neighbors told reporters that they heard people calling for help and when they came outside they saw the house burning and called 911.

The mother of the children, Kelly Brown, was at a neighbor's house doing laundry when the fire broke out. Her friend Jennifer Purcell told reporters that they smelled smoke and looked outside to see her house on fire. She ran to the house screaming that her children were inside but was held back by emergency personnel before collapsing and having to be helped away from the building.

On Thursday a candlelight vigil attended by between 75 and 100 people was held for the family.

Jeff Kuhlwind, 50, who lives across the street, told a reporter he was on his computer in the front of his house when he heard screaming, "Help! Help me!"

He said he tried to get into the house but was prevented by flames. "Nobody was getting in, there wasn't no way," he said. "It went quick, really, really quick."

A video of the fire was posted on YouTube.

The video shows flames engulfing the two upper floors, and one can hear Kelly Brown shouting that there are four children in the house. All six bodies were found on the third floor.

Eric Brown was without work, but Kelly worked at a local grocery store, likely at near-minimum wage pay.

Pottsville is a city of 14,000 in the eastern half of Pennsylvania. It is about 60 miles northeast of the state capital, Harrisburg. The town is in Pennsylvania's old anthracite coal mining region, and was once was a thriving industrial and coal community. The deindustrialization of much of the Northeast and Midwest has left Pottsville, like many communities, devastated.

Since 2000 the city has lost 8 percent of its population and the median household income is \$34,746, compared to \$51,651 for the state as a whole. Nearly 20 percent of the population live below the official poverty level. The main industry left in the town is a beer brewery.

The house, a narrow three-story single family wood frame structure sits with its back on a steep hill. The house was bought in 2002 for \$3,000. It was quickly engulfed in flames which burst through the second and third floor windows. The town's volunteer firefighters worked to prevent the building from collapsing and the

fire spreading to neighbor houses.

No cause of the fire has been established. However, many working class families use dangerous wood burning stoves or other forms of space heaters to avoid the cost of running their central heater.

Fire Chief Todd March, the department's only paid employee, said that this was the worst fire in his 37 years career in the fire department. City officials say that they cited the Brown family in December for not having smoke detectors and none appear to have been found by fire inspectors. However, the city does not have funds to provide the devices to low income or impoverished families.

Mayor John D. Reiley and Deputy Code Administrator David Petravich have both said that the house should have been declared unfit for residence if the water had been suspended, although it is not clear where the family would have gone to live—or if they would have been made homeless—had this measure been taken. Patrick Caulfield of the Schuylkill County Municipal Authority has not responded to requests for further information. On Thursday, codes administrator Donald Chescavage told the media he was too busy to speak on the matter.

There have been attempts to implicate the deceased father, Eric Brown. Media report that he had been slated to appear in court Wednesday for a possible prison sentence related to child endangerment and drug-related charges.

Those who knew the family have contradicted this negative portrait of the family.

“They were just a wonderful family that tried to do the best they could do and they never asked for much help,” Gypsy Williams said. “Kelly is a hard-working mom.”

Christina Schwartz, who works with Kelly Brown at the local Giant supermarket, said the children's mother saw to it that they were “well-behaved.”

A neighbor of the family told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he was disgusted by the behavior of the regional media. “I wish they would just leave us all alone so we could start to heal,” he said. The neighbor, who wished his name withheld, confirmed that the family's water had been suspended and that they were using a wood burning stove for warmth.

An elderly resident, Edith, said that she knew the children's mother. “She was just such a kind person,”

she said. “I can't believe they cut off their water. Why would they do that?”

Ron Adroschick, 77 and a retired Amtrak worker, said, “It's ridiculous that the city was allowing anyone to live in that house. It's just not safe. You can see it by looking at it. Why did they allow it?”

Ron told the WSWS that decades ago, when the region's anthracite mines were working, the city was prosperous. “Now there are only one or two small operations going,” he said. “There are no jobs like there used to be. That's why I went to work on the railroad.”



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