

Elderly couple dies in house fire on Detroit's west side

Shannon Jones
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As snow and cold temperatures blanketed the area, an elderly couple died in a house fire Friday on Detroit's west side. According to reports, 93-year-old Willie Branham, and his 86-year-old wife Mildred were killed in the blaze on Monica Street, near Davison and Livernois.

Interim Detroit Fire Chief Jonathon Jackson said that by the time firefighters arrived there was already a heavy fire in the den area in the back of the house. A neighbor said he had tried to enter the house but was blocked by heat and smoke. Mildred's body was found by a couch in the den, and her husband was found in the bathroom. Both were burned nearly beyond recognition.

A niece told investigators that a space heater the couple was using may have started the fire, but the house apparently had gas service. Willie Branham was legally blind, and Mildred needed help walking. Both previously worked for the Detroit Public Schools.

The Monica Street blaze adds to the grim toll of death and injury in Detroit due to house fires. A fire December 11 on Dwyer Street in Detroit left six people injured, including four children. Three generations of family members were crammed into the small house. The grandmother escaped by jumping out a second story window, breaking her leg and back. The youngest of the four children injured was reportedly bandaged from head to toe due to burns.

A fire December 6 on Prairie Street took the lives of two children aged 1 and 4. The cause of the fire has not been determined, with arson a possibility. A local firefighter said two space heaters were found in the house.

In a related development, three children died in a house fire Saturday in New Albany, Indiana sparked by a space heater. The three were all under the age of 10.

A fourth child escaped, along with the mother. The surviving child suffered severe injuries.

The fire gutted the front room of the house where the children died. The rest of the house suffered major damage from heat and smoke.

The Indiana home, built in the 1920s, is near a public housing project. New Albany is an industrial community located on the Ohio River across from Louisville, Kentucky. In 2009 24 percent of residents in the city had incomes below the official poverty level.

Space heaters are a common cause of house fires in winter, when many people use them as supplemental sources of heat or to save on soaring gas bills, especially in poor and working-class neighborhoods. According to the US Fire Administration, there are an average of 50,100 heating fires in the United States each year, resulting in approximately 150 deaths and 575 injuries, peaking in January. Heating was the second leading cause of all residential fires. Of that total, fires caused by portable heaters account for about 70 deaths and 150 injuries each year.

Many families use space heaters when their utilities are shut off. There is a clear connection between utility shutoffs and fire deaths, especially in the wintertime.

The risk of utility shutoffs is compounded this winter by several factors. Home heating bills are expected to rise this heating season, with natural gas expected to go up by as much as 13 percent. That figure could increase if the winter is colder than normal.

Meanwhile, in 2011, 300,000 families were dropped from the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) due to \$155 million in federal cuts. Grants for low-income heating assistance are being slashed. According to the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association, close to \$1.8 billion has been cut from LIHEAP since 2010. Grants for those who

still receive support have been reduced. Average LIHEAP grants are expected to fall from \$502 in 2009 to just \$375 in 2013.



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