

Three children killed in Indiana house fire

Chris Davion
11 January 2014

Three young children were killed and two others are hospitalized with serious injuries in the wake of a house fire in Hammond, Indiana Wednesday night. Seven-month-old Jayden Young, 3-year-old Alexia Young, and 4-year-old Dasani Young were found dead by emergency responders in their home on Sibley Street. The Lake County Coroner's office declared the cause of death as burns to the body for all three children.

The children's father, 27-year-old Andre Young, was in critical condition at Stroger Hospital with third-degree burns on Thursday. Young's two other children, ages 2 and 6, were reported to be in critical but stable condition in the hospital's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit after suffering smoke inhalation.

Firefighter reports suggest the blaze was caused by a space heater hooked up to a propane tank that the Young family had been using to heat their apartment. The family's gas and electricity had been shut off for the last nine months. Hammond fire investigators said that they recovered two space heaters and a candle in the front of the house where the fire is believed to have started. It was also the location where the three deceased children were discovered.

NIPSCO, the gas and electric company in Northern Indiana, reported that they had shut down the family's electric meter and gas in spring 2013 due to non-payment and alleged tampering with reading meters.

Neighbors reported that the Youngs had been relying on unconventional means to deal with a lack of basic utilities. Neighbor Nicki Flick told the *Sun-Times*, "They used a generator all summer, because she asked me if it was bothering me, because it was on the back porch. I said, 'Does it work?' She said, 'It keeps us comfortable.' I said, 'What's with NIPSCO?' She said 'Money.'"

Jasmin Rice, the Young's neighbor living in the unit above them, reported that the Youngs had been facing freezing temperatures inside their apartment without

access to heat all winter. Rice described the Young's accommodations in the first-floor apartment as 'spartan.' The family relied on space heaters to keep warm.

"They had had a propane tank and it had, like, an open flame," Rice said. "I just thought, they've got all these little kids running around and that could get knocked over so easy."

Rice also shared that she had previously offered to let the family spend nights upstairs as temperatures dropped below freezing, but the family declined.

Andre Young's grandmother, Annie L. Jones, 86, told the *Chicago Tribune*, "When I talked to them, they were using some kind of propane gas to keep warm. It was so cold over there... I never remember being it this cold."

She added that her grandson's family had been struggling economically, saying, "They ain't got nothing to bury them with, nothing to bury them kids with."

The lack of adequate heat in the downstairs apartment had also caused water pipes to freeze and burst, causing both Young's and Rice's apartments to have no running water. According to Rice, their landlord, Real Estate Equity Solutions, had made no repairs for weeks.

According to city records, Real Estate Equity Solutions had not allowed the building to be inspected, and ignored citations, penalties and fines. The corporation has a court date scheduled in Hammond City Court on January 16 for the violations.

Wednesday's house fire and the tragic deaths of three young children are the direct result of the utility shutoffs and cuts to badly needed aid, leaving working class and impoverished families without basic needs such as heat and lights.

Federal aid for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) was slashed 17 percent from 2010 to 2013, cutting off 1.5 million households

from energy assistance, according to the National Energy Assistance Director's Association. In Illinois, there are 350,000 households living below 150 percent of the federal poverty line that received LIHEAP assistance in 2012.

Amid deteriorating living standards and economic conditions for large sections of the population, and with no other apparent solutions, families are forced to resort to unconventional and often hazardous means to get electricity and heat their homes.

The record freezing temperatures across the Midwestern United States this winter have worsened already difficult circumstances for countless families seeking to keep warm, forcing many to use unsafe and makeshift methods to heat their homes. Additionally, many people in impoverished and working class neighborhoods who still have access to electric and gas utilities turn to using space heaters, particularly in the winter months, as an attempt to save on the rising cost of gas bills and related challenges caused by federal cuts to heating and energy assistance programs for low-income residents.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact