

Five die in North Minneapolis fire

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Troy Lewis lost five of his seven children in a fire Friday morning at the apartment he rented in North Minneapolis, one of Minnesota's poorest communities. He is currently hospitalized at Hennepin County Medical Center, together with his two surviving daughters, Shaca, age nine, and Electra, age six. The cause of the fire has not been determined, but a relative of a former tenant said that there were electrical problems on the upper levels of the home where Mr. Lewis' family lived. There was also a space heater found on the floor where the fire broke out.

The fire occurred at 2818 Colfax Avenue North. Brandi Craig, who lives across the street, said that she and her husband witnessed as the house went up in flames. She said that she saw Mr. Lewis lean out of a window as heavy smoke poured out, yelling for his neighbor to help him get the children out. The seven people living downstairs were able to escape. Mr. Lewis got Shaca out of the house and then Electra, but was unable to rescue the other children. Shaca and Electra remain in critical condition.

Mr. Lewis told the local CBS affiliate, "I kept hearing them holler, and then it got quiet, and I couldn't reach them." Mr. Lewis was raising the children himself, as his wife died from an illness in November 2013. He said, "All I can say is they were beautiful children. Should have never moved into that house."

The house was a 102-year-old duplex owned by a company that buys distressed or foreclosed properties and refurbishes them to rent to low-income families. The upstairs areas were heated with permanent electrical baseboard units. Lachonce Buckner told CBS that some of his relatives recently moved out of the duplex's upper levels because they had problems with the electrical outlets.

More than 40 firefighters were sent to the scene. Minneapolis Fire Chief John Fruetel stated, "This is very challenging on firefighters, they take this very

hard, especially when you have young people or children. It's very, very difficult. We certainly work with our firefighters to make sure that they have an opportunity to decompress, so to speak." One firefighter was injured.

The community has reached out in support of Mr. Lewis and his family. Approximately 100 people, including teachers from the Minneapolis Public Schools, gathered near the home on Saturday and held a vigil for the five children who died. Minneapolis Public School spokesperson Stan Alleyne told Minnesota Public Radio, "Some of these teachers are like mothers to these students, so it's very hard."

Melissa Jackson, principal at Bethune Elementary, where some of the children attended, told CBS, "Beautiful children – kindergarten, first-, second-, third-grade. I spent many minutes and memories with them. All just, beautiful, strong children. Loved coming to school, loved being a part of the school community. And it's just sad to see they won't be with us any more."

Taleaha Cox lived downstairs from Mr. Lewis and his family and was one of those who escaped. She told local KARE 11 News, "I hear them all day up there playing around, and to know what their family is going through, losing a parent already months prior to this, it's sad. Now he has to bury his kids."

Mr. Lewis is one of many people in the area living in extreme poverty. The bodies of the children who died in the home were burned too badly to be identified. They could not be identified through dental records because the family could never afford to take the children to the dentist. The duplex rented by Mr. Lewis is located in the Hawthorne neighborhood of North Minneapolis.

In 2011, the median income in Minneapolis was \$46,682. The median income in the Hawthorne neighborhood was \$31,237. The percentage of residents

there with less than a high school education was greater than 50 percent, and the percentage of the population considered below the poverty level was 43.6, compared to 23.7 percent for Minneapolis overall. In 2010, the unemployment rate in Hawthorne was 17.7 percent.

This is the third tragic fire reported in Minneapolis this year. On January 14, 2014, 24 people became homeless after a fire broke out in a duplex on the 1600 block of Hillside Avenue North, in a neighborhood adjacent to Hawthorne, where similar conditions of poverty exist. On New Year's Day, three people died from an explosion and fire that destroyed an apartment building in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood.



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