

House fire in Newark, New Jersey kills six family members

Steve Light
17 June 2014

A fire in Newark, New Jersey quickly spread throughout a three-story house killing four adults and two children in the early morning hours of Sunday, June 15. The tragedy is the latest in a string of house fires claiming multiple lives in urban areas scarred by poverty, cuts to city services and poor housing conditions.

The home, which was blackened and gutted, was wedged between another three-story house and a corner storefront church, which were not badly damaged. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the owner of the adjacent house, Mr. For, said he called 911 when he discovered the fire but said there was no response for what he estimated was two minutes.

For said after he got through to dispatchers, firefighters arrived in a minute and a half, taking another minute to connect the hoses. They tried to put a ladder in place but could not get in the house, he said. Neighbors reported that two men tried unsuccessfully to rescue family members but were repelled by flames and smoke.

Three victims who lived in the house were Reginald and Salome Stewart, both 58, and Salome Stewart's sister, Natasha Kinsale, 47. Also killed were Zion Forbes, 11, of East Orange, New Jersey, and Noreen Johnson, 43, and her son, Stephon Sydney, 15, who were both visiting from Crawford, Georgia. Mr. Stewart was a baggage agent at Newark Liberty International Airport but had not been working much because of an injury, a relative told the *Wall Street Journal*. Friends and relatives of the victims gathered in grief outside the house later in the day.

Initially authorities did not respond to questions that dispatchers had not answered emergency calls. According to a Fire Department spokesman, Capt. John Brown, the fire started at 3:48 a.m. and firefighters

were there within 3 minutes, knocking down the door to rush in. The fire had already become very intense on both floors and firefighters could not reach the people inside. The flames were "already shooting out the window," Brown said.

Although 85 firefighters in 19 trucks were said to have responded, the fire was not brought under control until 4:50 a.m.

Carolyn Murray, acting Essex County prosecutor, said the origin of Sunday's fire was still under investigation but officials did not consider it suspicious. Reportedly, there were no smoke detectors inside the home. A single undetermined heat source was thought to have ignited flammable artificial turf and plastic flowers on the porch and front of the house. The family were all in the second and third floor bedrooms and tried to escape, but were "trapped in the building by the sheer volume of fire," Newark Fire Chief John Centanni stated.

This was the worst house fire in Newark since five people, including three children, were killed in 2012. Houses located in the working class neighborhood near South 15th Street and Madison Avenue are well kept but old. The house where the family died was built in 1927 and was bought by Salome Stewart last year for \$125,000.

Poverty in Newark, New Jersey's largest city with a population of 300,000, has reached a 52-year high, with two of every five children in the city living below the federal poverty line. The official unemployment rate in Newark is above 14 percent, more than 50 percent higher than the national unemployment rate.

The morning after the Newark fire, a 94-year old man was killed and his 62-year-old daughter critically injured in Union City, New Jersey in a three-alarm fire said to have started in the dining area. Another family

member escaped and the brick home was badly damaged.

The Newark fire was the latest in a string of fires in New Jersey to claim the lives of more than one victim, the *Newark Star-Ledger* reports, the latest being on April 14 in a house fire in the town of Orange.

Also on the day after the Newark fire, in West Baltimore, Maryland, one child died and two were injured in a row house fire. Before firefighters arrived to battle the quickly spreading blaze, the older eight-year-old child was able to throw his four-year-old brother from the window to adults below.

A neighbor interviewed on WBAL-TV said she had called 911 but was put on hold. More than a quarter of Baltimore residents have incomes below the poverty rate compared to 12 percent for the state. Like most of the US, these older Northeastern cities have lost much of their industrial base.

Exacerbating this already bad situation is the indifference of the corrupt local Democratic Party politicians, who have overseen the decline of many major US cities, including Newark. The *Star-Ledger* reported in 2013 that failure to maintain the water system has resulted in 484 fire hydrants, a quarter of the city's total, to be out of service.

Like cities across the country, Newark has been hit by devastating budget cuts. Earlier this year Republican Governor Chris Christie's appointed superintendent of Newark schools, Cami Anderson, announced plans to lay off a third of the city's teachers as part of her plan to transform the city's public schools to privately run charter schools.

One and half hours away, the city of Camden cut close to a third of its fire department personnel to help close its budget deficit three years ago. At the time, the fire department, which had already been relying on help from volunteer departments in neighboring towns, acknowledged that the layoffs would increase response times.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact