

Chicago apartment fire kills four children

Marcus Day
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Four children were killed and two adults were left in critical condition in an apartment fire in Roseland, an impoverished neighborhood on Chicago's far South Side, early Monday morning.

The children—Eriana Smith, age 6, Shamarion Clark, 11, Carlvon Clark, 13, and Carliysia Clark, 16—had become trapped in a third-floor bedroom and were found dead by firefighters arriving at the scene.

The oldest child, Carliysia, was found in a closet on top of the youngest, Eriana, apparently having sought to shelter her.

Nikita McCarter, a resident of the building, told a local ABC television station, "The kids were lovely. They didn't deserve that—how they died. They didn't deserve that."

The apartment building had failed city inspections repeatedly over the last nine years, including one as recently as June. Among the numerous violations cited against the building's owner, Tahir M. Sheikh, were missing smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.

Last January, the city of Chicago filed suit against Sheikh for several municipal code violations including failure to provide adequate heating or hot or cold water, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. At the time of the city's inspection that month—in one of the severest winters in recent memory—it was found that the building's furnace was "severely damaged, not working at all," and had not been since October.

Chicago Fire Department officials say the fire seemed to have started around 3:30 a.m. in an apartment on the second floor of the building and spread quickly to the third floor. According to one firefighter, flames were shooting out of the building's windows "like a blowtorch" when they arrived.

Darlene Jones, a resident on the second-floor of the building, managed to escape with her 12-year-old daughter after being awakened by her barking dog. After opening her front door and seeing flames

shooting out of the apartment across the hall, Jones went out the back, knocking on other residents' doors and alerting them, and then called 911. She told the *Tribune*, "I tried to get everybody out. I started yelling, 'There's a fire!'"

The cause of the fire is still being investigated, although fire officials say it was not being considered suspicious. The occupant of the second-floor unit where the fire started, James Freeman, was not home at the time. He told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that he had complained to the building's management frequently about serious problems, including a stove which smoked and a broken lock on his front door. "I kept telling the landlord, 'Would you come fix the front door?' He wouldn't come. The front door was wide open. Anyone could come in."

Freeman expressed his regret over the children's deaths, saying, "I'm very sorry. They were very good kids."

J&J Real Estate Management and Construction, a company that was hired recently "primarily to collect rent and serve eviction notices," according to the *Tribune*, claimed that all of the building's tenants had working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors as of last week. However, Fire Media Affairs Director Larry Langford stated that neither the alarms in the second-floor apartment where the fire started nor in the third floor apartment where children were found were functional, although the hallway's hard-wired alarms appeared to have been working.

Shamaya Coleman, 33, the mother of the children, and her boyfriend, Nate Johnson, managed to jump from a third floor window and sustained serious injuries. Monday evening, Coleman, who had suffered multiple broken bones, was elevated from critical to serious condition. Meanwhile, Johnson remained in treatment for heavy inhalation of smoke and superheated air.

Neighbors stated that the back door of Coleman's apartment was broken, and after months of complaints by Coleman, had been boarded shut from the outside by building maintenance. A spokesperson for J&J Management claimed that door was instead boarded shut from the inside.

According to Chicago police the fire displaced around 50 people.

Roseland, along with the rest of Chicago's formerly heavily industrialized South Side, has suffered decades of factory closures, job cuts, and crumbling infrastructure. From a high of over 64,000 residents in the 1980s, the neighborhood's population has declined to a little more than 44,000 today, barely more than it was in the 1940s. As of 2010, nearly 20 percent of households lived below the federal poverty level, and the per-capita income was just \$17,974. The unemployment rate was 17.8 percent.



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