

House fire in Hamtramck, Michigan kills four, including two children

Khara Sikhan
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A fire broke out early Tuesday morning in a home in Hamtramck, Michigan, killing a family of four, including two children.

James and Fredye Parker, and their two sons aged 7 and 11, Jarred and James, were killed. The adults were actively involved in youth work, coaching several sports teams and are well known in the community. They are survived by two daughters.

“They were good people. They had two kids in college, and both of them worked hard. They were respectful citizens and good neighbors. I am seriously torn up after watching their house burn and knowing they died inside,” said Rose, a neighbor from three houses down.

The source of the fire is not yet known, though house fires are often caused by space heaters or other unsafe heating devices, which tend to be used because they can be cheaper than gas. Michigan is currently in the midst of a bitter cold spell, along with much of the US's Midwest and east coast.

There was no sign of smoke detectors in the house, according to fire inspectors.

The fire was not noticed by neighbors until it had consumed part of the house. By the time firefighters arrived on the scene, the entire structure was ablaze. About 20 firefighters from both Detroit and Hamtramck worked to fight the fire from 2 a.m. to 4:30 a.m.

The firefighters faced extremely difficult conditions. The roads and sidewalks in Hamtramck have not been plowed or salted all winter. The fire hydrant nearest to the house was frozen and inoperable. However, each fire engine carried one thousand gallons of water, and Detroit Fire Department routed a line from a fire hydrant across city lines.

The Parker household was filled with generations of family possessions, which apparently fueled the fire

and blocked firefighters from reaching the second story, where the family was located. A firefighting team made it partway through the first floor before they were forced out.

The WSWS spoke with Hamtramck Fire Department Chief Paul Wilk, who pointed to the potential dangers from the use of space heaters and other alternative forms of heat.

When asked about the conditions of the firefighting in general, Wilk said, “We are running consistently 6 firefighters per truck, which is a decent amount. Of course, we can always use more. On the safe level it would be preferable to have about 8 to 10, but the more manpower the better. New trucks don't matter if there's no manpower. If we had more men, we would have been able to do more last night to fight this fire.”

Wilk added, “Of course, the state is constantly looking at the costs while we were under emergency management, and the city has been in financial trouble for a while.”

As with many cities throughout Michigan, Hamtramck has been placed under the control of an “emergency manager,” whose task has been to slash city services to balance the budget. In 2012, the emergency manager considered closing the Hamtramck Fire Department. The model was taken from Pontiac, which dissolved its entire municipal services, including education, police and firefighting into nearby cities.

Wilk commented, “I can't even think of dissolving a fire department. It doesn't make any sense. What would have happened last night had we not been here?”

In the face of the threat of dissolution, Hamtramck firefighters agreed to take a 10 to 15 percent pay cut, which has not been returned. The emergency manager at the time, Cathy Square, cut \$2 million from Hamtramck's city service budget.

Detroit Fire Department is consistently running under manpower, with trucks in disrepair and a failing water system.

The fire in Hamtramck adds to the spate of fires throughout the US this winter. In the first week of February alone, house fires killed 71 people, following 298 deaths in the month of January.



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