

Six children dead in Baltimore house fire

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A house fire early Thursday morning in Baltimore's Cedmont neighborhood claimed the lives of six of Katie Malone's children, ranging in age from nine months to 11 years, and left her hospitalized. Malone's eight-year-old daughter managed to escape the blaze and save two younger children, boys ages four and five years old.

Around 12:30 a.m., one of Malone's neighbors awoke to a great booming sound. Robert Spencer, who lived across from the Malones, told the *Baltimore Sun* that he looked outside to see Katie Malone, her face blackened, fleeing from her burning home. Spencer rushed to assist Malone, inquiring about the children; she told him that three of the children had been pulled to safety, but the remaining six were trapped upstairs.

Spencer reported that he could hear the children screaming amidst the flames and attempted to enter the home to help them, but the heat was too great to withstand. Other neighbors reported that the heat radiated through their windows; it partially melted a nearby car.

Firefighters arrived at the scene quickly, but the three-storey, 107-year-old home was already completely engulfed in flames. As they attempted to enter, the third floor collapsed onto the second. They were forced to exit and battle the fire from the outside of the home. Fire Chief Niles Ford arrived later to find three firefighters kneeling helplessly in front of the charred remains of the Malone's home, distraught at their inability to save the children.

As the morning progressed, heavy excavating equipment was brought in to clear the debris so that the firefighters could search for the missing children. They recovered the first body by 10:30 a.m.; the last was discovered mid-afternoon. Katie Malone was taken to Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in critical condition. The four- and five-year-old boys remain in critical condition in Johns Hopkins pediatric intensive

care unit.

The Baltimore City Fire Department battled a record number of blazes in December. Nigel Ramirez, age three, and his brother, 9-month-old Exekial Ramirez, perished in a house fire on December 7. Ninety-year-old Polly Taylor died of smoke inhalation after being pulled from a burning home on December 10. That same day, ten-year-old Kamarl Ferrell and one-year-old Tylynn McDuffie died in a separate fire, which injured a 27-year-old man and a four-year-old boy. Those five fatalities doubled the previous December's number of fire fatalities in the city.

These numbers are appalling, but not surprising. In 2012, the city attempted to generate revenue for the fire department by offering advertisement space on firefighting apparatus; the department had been struggling for funding since the economic downturn in 2008. The shortfalls remain to this day. Baltimore's previous mayor, Democrat Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, slyly cut nearly 400 firefighters from the department starting in 2016.

Rawlings-Blake's 2017 budget, which offered an abundance of tax breaks to landlords and wealthy property owners, framed the budgeting issue as a matter of moving funding away from one crucial service, such as firefighting, and into another. Rawlings-Blake and the Baltimore City Council made a great pretense at wrangling over issues such as after-school care programs and libraries; yet the real disagreement between Rawlings-Blake and her opposition was in precisely how the city's government could exploit its working-class citizens in the interest of wealthy property owners.

Rawlings-Blake quickly pointed out that her proposed budget for 2017 did not make any cuts in the Baltimore Fire Department. In reality, the previous year's budget had already made deep cuts into the Department, at the expense of both the firefighters and the citizens they

served; no space was made within the 2017 budget to correct for those cuts, nor did Mayor Rawlings-Blake mention that the department had been struggling to maintain adequate staffing and equipment for well over seven years.

The budget she and the city council rolled out was heralded by both sides as a series of “tough decisions” the city government was forced to make. After the civil unrest in Baltimore following the Baltimore Police Department’s murder of Freddie Gray in 2015, Rawlings-Blake and the Baltimore City Council knew that they had to toe a fine line between keeping further unrest at bay and maintaining their own class interest. They highlighted the fact that they had not sacrificed after-school care programs, but they glossed over the criminal lack of funding for the fire department, rescue services, and other important social programs.

A nearly inhuman struggle lies ahead for the Malone family. With their home destroyed, funeral costs, and hospital bills, Katie Malone and her husband William must somehow stay afloat financially, supporting their remaining children, while working through wrenching grief. A Go-Fund-Me account was quickly set up for the family.

While the cause of the fire remains under investigation it is clear, however, that this tragedy, along with the other fire deaths in the city, has occurred against a backdrop of a deepening social crisis in the city.



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