

# Electrical problems likely cause of Indiana house fire that killed six

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A house fire in rural Logansport, Indiana killed six members of a working class family during the early morning hours last Wednesday.

The tragedy claimed the lives of Joseph Huddleston, 42; his stepdaughter Brandi Vail, 25, and his daughter Kadee Huddleston, 10; as well as Vail's three children, Swayzee Hite, 3; Rhylie Hite, 1; and Marshall Hite, 3 months. Huddleston's wife, Sheila, and his son, Brandon, escaped to safety when the blaze broke out and were taken to Logansport Memorial Hospital for treatment when officials arrived at the scene.

Brandi Vail, the mother of three of the children, had recently started a new job at S.U.S. Casting Products, an aluminum casting plant in Logansport before her death. A co-worker told the *IndyStar* that she was a "dependable worker with a sweet personality" and workers at the plant were collecting money for Vail's brother Rory, who is also employed at S.U.S., and other surviving family members.

The fire was reported by a 911 call at 1:50 a.m. and remains under investigation by the Indiana State Fire Marshal and State Police.

While the exact cause is still under investigation, Indiana State Police Sgt. Tony Slocum told the press that after an inspection of the debris that there was no evidence that the fire had been set intentionally, nor were the stove or water heater the causes. He said that there was "some evidence that the fire could have been caused by an electrical issue." Due to the level of destruction caused by the fire—the home collapsed in the blaze—the exact causes of the fire could be difficult to determine, authorities say.

Smoke and flames overwhelmed two sheriff's deputies who tried to break into the home to save the remaining family members, according to the *IndyStar*. Firefighters from Logansport and the surrounding area

fought to control the flames for over five hours, an effort made difficult by the frigid temperatures and wind.

Additionally, it was reported that there were no fire hydrants in the area of the fire—pointing to the lack of funding for fire prevention and safety measures in rural areas. Firefighters had to bring their own tankers of water to the scene and ran out of water for five minutes during the early stages of their efforts.

The State Fire Marshal's office and the State Police reported that no working smoke detectors were found in the home after the investigation. David Hosick, spokesman of the Indiana Department of Homeland Security said it is difficult to determine if more of the family members would have been saved had there been working smoke detectors present. However, he noted that the presence of working smoke detectors greatly increases chances of survival in a home fire.

Two children perished in another house fire in Logansport two months earlier in the early morning hours of September 9 of this year. A third infant child survived and was airlifted to Riley Children's Hospital for treatment after the children's mother managed to jump out of the house with him in her arms. The fire was also believed to have been caused by electrical problems, specifically the home's electrical box.

According to 2016 data, Logansport has a median household income of \$34,085, significantly lower than the median for the state of Indiana (\$50,433) and the United States as a whole (\$55,332). The poverty rate in the northern Indiana city is 19.4 percent, compared to 14.1 percent in the state of Indiana and 14 percent in the United States overall. The largest employer in the region is Tyson Foods, which owns and operates meatpacking plants in the area.

Duke Energy Corporation became Logansport's

primary energy supplier after the municipality closed its coal-powered plant, operated by Logansport Municipal Utilities, in January 2016, citing that it would be too expensive to operate the plant and meet the emissions goals proposed by the Obama administration. The *Indiana Economic Digest* reported that Duke had been trying to shut the plant down since 2010.

Duke Energy operates as a monopoly in North Carolina, where its headquarters is based, and derives most of its revenue from supplying most of the energy for large parts of the states of Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky and South Carolina. In 2017, it reported \$3.06 billion net income and \$137.91 billion in total assets.

Duke has been guilty of several incidences of negligence in recent years, which have had catastrophic consequences for the defenseless victims. In February, 2014, a drainage pipe in a coal ash containment pond owned by Duke burst and sent 39,000 tons of coal ash into the Dan River in North Carolina, in addition to 27 million gallons of wastewater.

More recently, Duke showed its utter incompetence after Hurricane Florence hit North Carolina in September of this year. David Fountain, President of Duke Energy in North Carolina, stated that residents would be without power for “Not days but weeks. We won’t even be able to get to some areas for several days.” The company also said that the flooding from the storm could cause coal ash flooding in the region and only agreed to clean up its coal ash pits by 2029.

The two fires in Logansport are part of a rash of deadly house fires that have swept the Midwest in recent months. In the early morning hours on August 26, a fire that killed 10 children broke out in the Little Village on Chicago’s West Side. No working smoke detectors were found in the home, and residents still do not have answers as to the causes of the fire months later. Electrical problems were ruled out as a cause by city officials, but a resident who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* thinks otherwise, as the building had several violations on record, some due to electrical problems.

Though some 120 miles apart, the fires in Little Village and Logansport are undeniably similar in a number of ways. In both fires, the homes were not found to have working smoke detectors. Electrical issues are a definite possibility for cause in both fires.

Both fires occurred in areas with large working-class populations that have borne the brunt of deindustrialization, with higher than average rates of poverty.

Making these connections shows that these house fires are not a result of any sort of racial discrimination, or an urban vs. rural issue. They are the result of the inability of the capitalist system to guarantee the basic needs of the working class, which include safe and affordable housing, reliable energy infrastructure and access to basic utilities. Energy giants like Duke must be expropriated by a coordinated effort of the working class and put under public control.

Workers in these industries, like the locked-out utility workers at National Grid in Massachusetts, must organize rank-and-file committees to fight for the nationalization of these industries, overthrow corporate control of these necessities and instead put them under workers’ control to be used to meet the needs of society, not private profit.



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