

Mother of twins killed in New Jersey house fire abandoned by local and state officials: “I’m pretty much on my own at this point”

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Nearly six weeks after a fire engulfed her home in Trenton, New Jersey, killing her 20-year-old twin sons, Sadiyyah Brown has yet to receive answers or support of any kind from the city or the state.

A health care worker and mother of three other children, Brown has been left on her own to grieve. Her experience reveals the callous disregard that the ruling class has for the lives and well-being of workers.

On April 2, Brown went to a corner store with her brother and her 17-year-old son. Brown’s 16-year-old daughter, her 24-year-old son and her 20-year-old twins stayed at home.

The twins, Mar’kyi and Mar’kym Pierce, were nonverbal and severely autistic. “We had to do everything for them,” said Brown, whose brother helped her raise them for almost eight years. The twins impressed everyone as sweet and easygoing. “You didn’t have to do much to make them laugh or keep them happy,” Brown told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

She was at the store for no more than 15 minutes. When she came back, the house was completely ablaze. “I’ve never even seen a fire that moves so fast,” Brown explained. Police and firefighters were on the scene, and Brown repeatedly tried to run into the house to save her children. “To be honest with you, I was not really worrying about my own life,” she said. Several officers restrained Brown, who thrashed around on the ground before finally allowing herself to be handcuffed.

Brown’s daughter and oldest son escaped the building, but the twins were trapped on the third floor. The family tried to tell the firefighters about the twins before the fire reached the third floor. “They should have gotten a ladder, or they should have started spraying water in that area,” said Brown. “I think the fire was so severe, they did not even really know how to start or where to begin.” The fire appeared to be larger than any they had ever dealt with before. Four firefighters were hurt during the operation.

“To think about it is just mind-boggling,” said Brown. “I

am speechless. I feel like I do not even know how I am going to move forward with my life without having them in my life.” One of the family’s two dogs also was killed, along with two kittens.

Brown has lived in New Jersey for her whole life. She grew up in Asbury Park, a city on the Atlantic Ocean known for its beach and its boardwalk. She later moved to the nearby coastal town of Neptune, where she lived for more than 25 years. In 2017, Brown began working as a medication tech at an assisted living facility in Spring Lake, which is approximately four miles away from Neptune.

Last year, Brown’s landlord sold the house where she and her children had been living, and the new owner wanted to live in the building. Brown and her family had to move in June 2021, and the closest home she could find was in Trenton, on the Delaware River northeast of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. “Trust me, it was not a place I really wanted to come, but I had no choice,” Brown noted. After the move, she had to travel almost 50 miles to her job in Spring Lake.

New Jersey is one of the wealthiest states in the country, and Democratic Governor Phil Murphy is a multimillionaire and former executive for investment bank Goldman Sachs. But Trenton, the state capital, is a notoriously violent city with a poverty rate of 27 percent, according to the US Census Bureau. Participation in the civilian labor force is about 57 percent.

The city’s current circumstances give little indication of its previous significance. Trenton was the site of General George Washington’s first military victory during the Revolutionary War. In 1799, an outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia, which was then the nation’s capital, prompted the federal government to move temporarily to Trenton.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the city became a center for the manufacture of pottery, wire rope and rubber. Changes in the economy after World War II led to the decline of the manufacturing industry and the shedding of jobs. Beginning in the 1970s, businesses looked elsewhere

for profits, and Trenton subsequently has been marked by decay and neglect.

Brown never liked or felt at home in Trenton. “I always felt a type of paranoia,” she said. “I don’t know why. I have PTSD because of it.” Although the street where the family lived was relatively quiet, it was nevertheless the site of a shooting during their time in Trenton.

The house itself had several problems. The landlord, Abdoulie Bandeh, had installed one smoke detector in a hallway instead of installing a smoke detector in each room. There was no fire extinguisher in the house. The kitchen ceiling was falling down, said Brown, and the bathroom was in disrepair for several months. When Bandeh and his brother were about to fix the bathroom, they turned off the gas. But Bandeh’s brother and Brown nevertheless smelled gas, which suggested a gas leak.

After the fire and the loss of her sons, Brown was briefly hospitalized for psychiatric treatment. She has become “nervous about everything” and has had difficulty sleeping. Her grief is deep, but she believes that her surviving children are handling it better than she is. “They are supporting me through this whole ordeal,” she explained.

Neighbors have helped the family however they could. They brought blankets and donated money, most of which was used to pay for the twins’ funeral. The Red Cross, too, has been in regular contact with Brown.

But Brown has gotten no help from Bandeh, her former landlord. Brown had paid her April rent on the day before the fire and Bandeh has refused to return it to her. Brown is legally entitled to receive her security deposit, but Bandeh has refused to return that, as well. In fact, his wife callously accused Brown of having started the fire to get the security deposit back. Bandeh is no longer returning Brown’s calls and she plans to file suit against him.

Neither the city nor the state has offered Brown any assistance. “I’m pretty much on my own at this point,” she said. The city is investigating the cause of the fire, but no one has contacted Brown to provide her with information about it. The investigation is ongoing, and Brown’s lawyer told her that it is unusual for such a case to be open for so long.

Fortunately, Brown had found a new home mere days before the fire. She had been scouring the internet for months for a new place to live. “That was my main goal every day, to get out of Trenton,” she said. “You would never think that this is the capital of New Jersey. It should be somewhere people want to live. It is not like that. It is totally different.” Brown’s new home is an apartment that, though not big, provides the shelter that her family needs.

The failure of the city and state governments to offer Brown and her family any aid is an indictment of the entire

social order. No official has stepped forward to offer the family clothes, food or psychological counseling in the aftermath of this terrible tragedy, which will affect them for the rest of their lives. This official indifference is of a piece with the criminally negligent response of the state and federal governments to the coronavirus pandemic—resulting in at least 1 million deaths over the last two years. All considerations of public health and welfare have been subordinated to the profit interests of the banks and the corporations.

A GoFundMe page has been set up raise money to support Brown and her family. So far it has raised more than \$8,600.

House fires and associated injuries and deaths are tragically common in the United States, striking working class and impoverished families the hardest. In January, an apartment fire in the Bronx in New York City killed 17, including eight children. At the end of April, a fire at a mobile home in Fort Wayne, Indiana claimed the lives of four children.

Based on 2020 data, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports that a home fire occurs on average every 89 seconds in the United States. There were 379,500 residential structure fires in 2020, resulting in 2,730 civilian deaths and 11,900 injuries.

The NFPA notes that the connection between poverty and increased risk of residential fires has been well documented for decades. High-poverty neighborhoods are at increased risk for house fires. Low-income families have no choice but to crowd together in older or sub-standard housing. Working class families are at risk of utility shutoffs, meaning they must turn to alternative means of heating in cold winter months which can result in accidental fires.

Preventing house fires by guaranteeing safe, affordable housing as a social right is not possible without organizing the working class in a fight for socialism and against the capitalist system which creates the social conditions that give rise to these tragedies.



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