

# Retired teacher killed in Chicago apartment that failed fire alarm test

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On Wednesday morning, a fire that spread vertically through an apartment building in Chicago's South Side neighborhood of Kenwood killed one resident and injured nine others, including a firefighter. The fire started at approximately 10 a.m. on the 15th floor of the Harper Square Cooperative residential building at 4850 Lake Park Avenue and shot up vertically through nine floors, reaching the 24th floor.

City officials claimed that windy conditions helped the fire to spread upward quickly in the high-rise that was constructed in 1970. The exact cause of the fire remains unknown at this time.

According to CBS Chicago, over 300 firefighters and emergency responders from the Chicago Fire Department worked to extinguish the blaze until 12:30 p.m., and continued to monitor the area afterward. Chicago Fire Commissioner Annette Nance-Holt pointed to the difficulty posed to firefighters because the "fire did not go horizontally." The exhausting conditions were further exacerbated by the loss of elevator functionality, presumably caused by the blaze, so that firefighters had to carry more than 85 pieces of equipment up 15 flights of stairs.

Many of the residents were told to stay in the building as the fire was being extinguished, due to the nature of its spread and the assumption that the high rise buildings are generally designed to keep those inside safe, according to Deputy Fire Commissioner Marc Ferman, "with fire-rated doors" and enclosed hallways and stairwells. It is unclear if or how any part of the building's construction was conducive to the vertical and rapid spread of Wednesday morning's blaze.

As of Wednesday afternoon, all injured victims who were transported to nearby hospitals were reported to be in stable condition. None of the victims' names, including that of the deceased woman, have been released as of this writing.

The resident who died was a retired teacher whose apartment is thought to have been where the fire immediately originated. Jauntanne Mayes, a woman who was close to the retired teacher and helped to care for her, told the press, "I knew that she could not get down the stairs by herself, and unfortunately they wouldn't let me up to go and check on her" when she arrived at the building.

"Nobody had been able to reach her, and then I was just informed that she was a person who passed away." She said that the woman who died was "just a really sweet, sweet person, really generous, she will be missed by a lot of people."

In addition to those injured and killed in the fire, 47 residents have been displaced and the Red Cross is currently assisting them. WGN9 News Chicago reported that residents who witnessed the fire spread through the building said, "the whole day has been traumatic and scary." Harper Square Cooperative is home to many senior citizen residents who have lived in the building for many years.

Residents were concerned that the building management's attitude was callous and neglectful of the many seniors who lived in the building. They said that building management sent emails to all residents a half hour after the fire started, alerting them to stay inside their apartments as the fire spread.

It is unclear what the city of Chicago and the Democratic Party, which has a political monopoly in the city, will do to help residents find new housing in a city where the cost of living has been rising for years. Social services have been gutted to entice corporations with subsidies and tax breaks in recent decades by Democratic mayors and city councils, such as those run by Richard Daley, Rahm Emanuel and incumbent Lori Lightfoot.

Kenwood is a predominantly working-class neighborhood on the city's south side, close to Lake

Michigan. Sixty-six percent of residents are African-American. Median income per household in the neighborhood is \$52,336, according to 2016-2020 American Community Survey five-year estimates; this is significantly lower than the median income for the city of Chicago (\$62,097) but twice as high as the impoverished Washington Park neighborhood nearby (\$23,351).

However, when compared to some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city such as Lincoln Park (median income \$117,048) and West Town (\$112,555), a picture of a city that is deeply divided along class lines, in a country and world where social chasms are continuously widening, is revealed.

These deep divides are fueling real estate speculation in the city that is pushing working class and poor residents to their financial limits. Price fluctuations in the housing market during the pandemic added more fuel to the frenzy. In the Kenwood neighborhood, New York investment group Raskin Risers sold six apartment buildings for a total of \$26.3 million to Atlas Asset Management in December 2022, according to *Crain's Chicago Business*. The buildings were sold at a 40 percent increase in value, as Raskin Risers bought the portfolio of buildings for a total of \$18 million during the pandemic, financed mainly with low-income housing tax credits.

Atlas President David Pezzola told *Crain's* that the "policy that limits rents in the buildings will expire over the next few years," pushing out low-income residents and making room for the corporation to extract greater profits from rising rental costs.

Although the cause of the fire is still under official investigation, there are countless examples of neglect in the maintenance and construction of buildings from the west side of Chicago to Miami, Florida to the UK that cause fires and disasters for the working class and senior residents that reside in them. In all cases, the disasters were largely preventable, and the neglect and poor construction were carried out to benefit profit-driven business owners and corporations.

The recent tragedy in Kenwood taken into context with similar occurrences worldwide underscores the underlying issue behind disasters like these is not primarily one caused by racism, as promoted ad nauseum by the Democratic Party, but by class interests. In contrast to the divestment of funding for basic living standards of the working class and senior citizens in the city, the multi-million dollar Obama Presidential Center is under construction less than five miles from Harper Square Cooperative.

The Center is being funded by a \$400 million investment from the Obama Foundation, announced in April 2021 ostensibly to "strengthen economic opportunities" for "South and West Side residents." In reality, low-wage and dangerous construction work is being carried out by working class residents from Chicago's deindustrializing neighborhoods and the Center is part of an effort to attract corporate plundering and real estate speculation to take advantage of the lower housing prices and low cost of labor in the nearby working class neighborhoods of South Shore and Woodlawn.

The very processes that neglect older buildings where lower-income and senior residents reside, in favor of corporate profits, are overseen and encouraged by Democratic Party officials in Chicago. Democratic 4th Ward Alderman and mayoral candidate Sophia King appeared at the scene for the obligatory press coverage and crocodile tears, to cover up once again the criminal processes aided and abetted by the party to which she belongs.

Fire alarms and smoke detectors in the Harper Square building were reported to have batteries in them, according to the Fire Commissioner, but it is unclear if all were working properly. Residents told the *Chicago Sun-Times* that in some cases they were awakened by loud alarms and others reported they only heard them faintly and had to knock on their neighbors' doors to alert them that a fire was spreading.

Some residents reported to the *Chicago Sun-Times* that they felt that the emergency response from the city was timely, but others disagreed. Resident Stephanie Lassiter told the newspaper, "No one knocked on the doors, no one said anything, no one knew... I texted my daughter who also lives in the building and said, 'I think there's a fire in the building' and she said she didn't think so."

Building management was cited by the city in its last inspection on December 1, 2022 for failing to provide an annual fire alarm test for the building, according to records. This failure to provide basic safety standards to residents potentially contributed to unnecessary loss of life, health and housing.



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