

PREDAWN BLAZE KILLS 3 FAULTY HYDRANTS ARE ISSUE AGAIN

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For the second time in less than two weeks, Detroit firefighters responded to a house fire in which children were killed and the closest fire hydrants did not work.

Fire officials said the broken hydrants were not responsible for the deaths in either case.

"But that's missing the point," said Executive Fire Commissioner Charles Wilson. "Fire needs water just like it needs trucks and firefighters."

Wilson was so frustrated after the Wednesday morning fire in which two girls and a 22-year-old man died on Detroit's west side that he called a news conference at a fire station that night.

"There are 34,000 hydrants in Detroit. We need the public's help to report the ones that aren't working," he said, adding that his office had prepared a report to give to the Mayor Dennis Archer that proposes ways to fix the situation. The proposal includes a computerized database to map every hydrant in the city and quickly tell firefighters which hydrants are functioning and which cannot be used.

When firefighters arrived in the 1500 block of Cortland, just off the Lodge Freeway at 3 :05 a.m., flames were rolling out of the top of Rhonda Davis' second-story apartment.

Firefighters quickly sprayed water from their truck tanks on the fire, said Chief Lee Moore, a spokesman for the Fire Department. One of three tanks carried 1,000 gallons of water; it wasn't clear how much water the others carried. But it wasn't enough.

The closest hydrant was 100 feet away. It didn't work. Firefighters moved one block north to Highland and tried another hydrant. It didn't work, either.

Firefighters found a third hydrant, 10 houses down from the burning dwelling, that worked. Both broken hydrants are about the same distance from the house.

Moore said the **blaze** was put out in about 50 minutes. He also said the fire spread so quickly that had the first two hydrants worked, it would not have made a difference.

Rhonda Davis, 29, made it out alive, jumping from her second-story window. Her 7-year-old son, Hashim Rhodes, also leaped from the second story. He was listed in fair condition Wednesday night at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Davis was in critical condition at Detroit Receiving Hospital with second- and third-degree burns over a third of her body, Moore said.

The boy had jumped out of the window before fire trucks arrived. It was not clear whether Davis was out before or after trucks arrived.

Davis' daughters, RayShonda Pugh, 13, and RayMonda Pugh, 11, were found dead in their bedroom. Davis' boyfriend, Carlos Lumpkin, was found dead in the kitchen. His body was discovered more than two hours after the fire was extinguished -- he was buried under the fallen roof.

Two others were also in the upstairs apartment; they escaped down the home's stairs. Wilson said that another family of at least three people escaped from the downstairs apartment. Fire alarms were working, Wilson said.

"What a shame," said neighbor Barbara Brown. She woke up when the trucks arrived. From her bedroom window, she said, she saw cinders and flames flying everywhere.

"I was praying for the kids and that the cinders would not hit my house," she said. "I was also thinking about how I just saw the little girls playing in the snow yesterday."

Of Detroit's fire hydrants, more than 2,000 are in need of repair and close to 700 don't work, Wilson said. That proportion far exceeds the number of nonworking hydrants in other major cities, which keep their backlog of hydrant repairs to 70 at most. Some cities, like Chicago, say they have no backlog of hydrants to repair.

Firefighters rely on the hydrant system as a lifeline. Most engines carry from 350 to 1,000 gallons of water, while hydrants can be used to pump thousands of gallons a minute.

On Dec. 1, firefighters were forced to divert to a second hydrant to fight a Detroit fire that killed six children.

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Caption: Photo ATOYIA DEANS/Detroit Free Press; Photo; Map Detroit Free Press

A Wednesday morning **blaze** on Cortland killed two girls and a 22-year-old man. The girls' mother and brother survived by jumping out the window of their second-story apartment; two others, also in the upstairs apartment, ran down the stairs and out of the residence.

RayMonda Pugh, 11, left, and RayShonda Pugh, 13, were killed in the early morning **blaze**. The nearest fire hydrant was not working, but a fire official said that even it wouldn't have saved them. Detroit Water and Sewerage employees try to fix a hydrant that wasn't working Wednesday when needed to fight a **blaze**.

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