

FIRE THEORIES IN OPPOSITION OFFICIAL SAYS KIDS' PLAY POSSIBLE

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A smoldering cigarette or children playing with matches ignited a bedroom mattress and apparently caused the fire that took six young lives in a downtown public housing complex, the Detroit Fire commissioner said Sunday.

An investigation also revealed that two of the boys who died had started a fire at another east-side residence, said Commissioner Charles Wilson. He was unsure of the date of the other fire.

Family members disagreed with the possible causes mentioned by Wilson and said a faulty furnace could have started the fire.

Police dogs checked the apartment in the Brewster-Douglass complex during the weekend and found no sign of accelerants, Wilson said.

"It appears someone was smoking and may have dropped a cigarette in bedding materials in the lower first-floor bedroom," Wilson said. "Or, there were kids playing with matches."

The fire on Friday at 2537 St. Antoine killed **Blake Brown**, 2; Christopher Brown, 4; Joyce Brown, 6; Jermaine Fish, 6; Johnny Fish, 7, and Naomi Fish, 2. Seven-month-old Jonathan Fish was in critical condition Sunday at Children's Hospital of Michigan in Detroit.

"This is a tragic accident, the worst in the history of public housing in the City of Detroit," said Roz Edward, a Detroit Housing Commission spokeswoman.

A single funeral for the six children is scheduled for 10 a.m. Saturday at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, 3600 Van Dyke, near Mack Avenue in Detroit.

Three of the deceased were the children of Juanita Fish, 25. The three others belonged to her sister, Jo Ann Campbell, 31. Jerry Bell, the women's cousin, said the families are not satisfied with the Fire Department's assessment.

Neither woman smokes, Bell said, and the children were asleep at the time of the fire.

"We believe there were problems with the furnace," Bell said Sunday. "And there's no way those children started that fire."

Wilson said the findings Sunday are preliminary.

Wilson said firefighters took an offensive fire-fighting tactic, attacking the fire with 1,000 gallons of water on each of the first two responding fire engines.

Once they knocked down the fire, Wilson said, firefighters immediately entered the apartment and retrieved three children, who later died. Firefighters had trouble connecting to a nearby fire hydrant. A hose burst, making water pressure initially slow.

"They replaced it and went about the business of fighting the fire," Wilson said.

While the regular fire engine driver was in court, Wilson said, a 9-year-veteran, Dan O'Neill, drove Fire Engine 1, the first to arrive at the scene. O'Neill is qualified to drive a fire engine and operate pumps, Wilson said.

"There's no question as to our procedure," Wilson said. "As far as I'm concerned we did the best we could do, given the situation."

At the scene of the burned apartment Sunday, stuffed animals covered the ground in front of the first-floor window.

Keith Wilson, 10, who lives in the complex, dropped a stuffed Snoopy doll into the pile. "It's really sad," he said.

A large red ribbon and a sympathy card were taped to the boarded-up front door.

Dianna Brooks, who lives two doors down, said she has had nightmares since the fire. She said she can't stop picturing 7-month-old Jonathan, who survived the blaze.

"I ran out of my apartment, there were flames everywhere and someone handed him to me," Brooks said. "He was coughing up blood. It was terrifying."

* Contributions can be sent to the Campbell/Fish Memorial Fund, c/o Shore Bank, 14533 Mack Ave., Detroit, Mich., 48215.

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