

Michigan woman killed in blaze near closed fire station

By David Brown and Andre Damon
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A 73-year-old woman burned to death in a fire early Thursday morning in Taylor, Michigan just minutes away from a fire station closed due to budget cuts. Firefighters believe the blaze could have been caused by a space heater.

The fire took place at the Robinwood Mobile Home Park in Taylor, a suburb southwest of Detroit. Neighbors said they were enraged at the city government for shutting down the fire station. “If the fire station were open, she’d probably still be alive,” said neighbor Megan Powers, a stay-at-home mother.

“She just kept screaming for help,” said Mrs. Powers. “Her son tried to rescue her and got burned, but he couldn’t get inside.”

The fire occurred only a half mile from Taylor’s Fire Station II, which was shuttered earlier this year due to budget cuts. The firefighters who responded had to come from a station eight times as far, and arrived ten to fifteen minutes after the fire started, neighbors said.

“Once firefighters get a call in this area, it can take them six to ten minutes to arrive. But trailer homes just go up in flames; they’re usually gone within six minutes,” said a source close to the firefighters.

Just two years ago, the city had three fire stations and 61 firefighters. Now the city only has 23 firefighters in one station to cover the city’s entire 24 square miles.

The shuttered fire station, just down Ecorse road, stood empty when visited on Thursday morning. Inside gleamed a new red ambulance. “The city is still making payments on four ambulances, but they’re not being used, nominally because there is no money,” said the same source.

Neither the fire department nor Robinwood management has released the name of the woman who was killed nor those of the two other people injured. They said, however, that the woman was an Alabama

resident who was visiting her relatives in Taylor over the holidays.

Taylor fire department officials said the fire was likely caused by a space heater, and neighbors said that the home’s furnace was not working. Overnight temperatures fell well below the freezing point.

The woman’s son, who suffered burns trying to rescue her, declined treatment, the fire department said. “It doesn’t surprise me,” Powers said, “they say the furnace wasn’t working, or their smoke detectors. They had to use space heaters. It doesn’t sound like they had money to go to the hospital if they could avoid it.”

Last February, it took the Taylor Fire Department 30 minutes to respond to a garage fire that killed Dustin McCloud, a friend of Ms. Powers, and injured two others. According to Powers, the fire departments from neighboring cities were able to get to the scene first but it was too late.

The fire spread to two other homes, which were partly destroyed. Cherie Vergis and her son Howard T. Brisendine lived in one of the damaged homes. They’ve lived in the neighborhood for eight years and have witnessed several fires during that time.

“It really doesn’t take long at all for one of these trailers to burn,” Vergis said. “Last night, I didn’t really understand what was going on. I started to go back into my house to get a few things, but thankfully my neighbors stopped me because the other side of my home was already on fire.”

As Brisendine looked through his partially burned and waterlogged home, he denounced the city government. “If that station was open they could have saved this house and maybe that woman’s life.” However, he said he had nothing but gratitude for the firefighters. “They really went above and beyond. From the moment they got here they didn’t just put out

the fire, but saved all of our possessions that they could.”

Mark Hall, a truck driver who lives at Robinwood, pointed out that the closure of the fire stations in Taylor pointed to the much broader social problems.

“We’re in an economic crisis and we’re all hurting. But you can’t just make cuts to things people need to live. A lot of people here are out of work and the government is cutting back on unemployment again. What’s that going to do to the economy? We shouldn’t be closing fire stations; people are going to die that way.”

Taylor is a working-class suburb, hit hard by the collapse of the auto industry and deindustrialization in the area. “Everything in Taylor is shutting down,” said Larry, a former pipe fitter at Ford. “The auto plants are gone, and the industry has an occupancy rate of less than 50 percent.”

“Now they’re gutting the local government. They just got rid of most of the city clerk’s office: the city clerk has no staff, and the treasurer has no staff: in a city of over 60,000 people! There’s no one to call if your trash isn’t picked up.”

“There’s just so much that’s wrong, so much that’s corrupt, but the media doesn’t talk about it, and we’re supposed to act like it’s normal.”

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