

EMS cuts delayed ambulance in fatal Detroit fire

By Lawrence Porter
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Anger is growing over the death of six-year-old Miguel Chavez in a Southwest Detroit house fire. Cuts in ambulance services implemented under the administration of Democratic Mayor Dave Bing appear to have contributed to the tragic death, as well as in delayed treatment for his four-year-old brother who is still in critical condition.

Around 7 a.m. Tuesday morning, a fire erupted in the second floor of the two-family flat at 5277 Tarnow Street, where 6-year-old Miguel and 4-year-old Julio Chavez were sleeping.

Firefighters say evidence indicates the fire started on a mattress and spread quickly through the apartment, filling it with heavy smoke. Upon their arrival they found the two boys in the bathroom where Miguel was covering his 4-year-old brother in an attempt to protect him. It is possible that the fire was ignited by a space heater as the family was living without heat at the time.

Sylvia Chavez, a single mother whose husband was deported to Honduras according to neighbors, was working the night shift at a job she recently found when the fire broke out.

Neighbors, families and first responders were outraged that an ambulance did not arrive at the scene of the fire, which forced firefighters to transport the children to the hospital in a fire squad truck. Unlike an EMS ambulance, a fire squad truck does not carry oxygen or other equipment for immediate medical treatment.

A Fire Department spokesman told the WSWs that the city does not send out ambulances to all house fires. “When it came in to us it came as a house fire. We only send an EMS if we know there are occupants in the house. We received a call at 7:12 that there were occupants and an EMS was sent at 7:13 a.m.”

Firefighters who responded to the fire clearly did all

they could to rescue the children. According to the report issued by the Fire Department 17 firefighters arrived 5 minutes after receiving the initial call at 7:04 a.m. There were two engines, a squad car, a ladder engine and a fire chief dispatched to the scene.

By 7:15 a.m. the firefighters on the scene felt they could not wait any longer. The fire chief on the scene dispatched Rescue Squad 4 to take the boys to Henry Ford Hospital, the nearest major hospital to the fire.

The firefighters who traveled to the hospital in the squad car administered CPR to the children, likely saving the younger child’s life. Medics at Henry Ford Hospital, however, had the children transferred to the burn center of Children’s Hospital because they are not set up for such emergencies. EMS personnel might have saved time since they would have been aware of the best location for this type of injury.

According to news reports issued by WDIV-TV on January 28—one day prior to this tragedy—the city has been operating with between 10 and 14 ambulances covering 139 square miles. The city officially aims for 19 working vehicles a day, half of the fleet size operating in 2009. The aging vehicles have 175,000-200,000 miles on them. EMS workers warn that within months the city could have virtually no ambulances in working order.

This situation is the product of decades of cuts by successive Democratic administrations, with the Bing administration implementing the virtual destruction of emergency services in the city. So far this year the city has cut \$246 million from the budget under the Consent Agreement with Republican Governor Rick Snyder. The cuts included the layoff of 2,600 workers in the city and the shutdown of 15 fire stations.

At the time of the fire, the two closest ambulances were either disabled or out on a minor run. It emerged

later that the unit sent on the “minor run” had requested to go to the fire on Tarnow Street. The dispatcher was faced with an impossible choice and declined the run. Instead, the vehicle which was eventually dispatched was more than six miles away.

The tragic death of Miguel Chavez does not come as a surprise to firefighters and emergency rescue workers who have been warning Detroit citizens of the fatal consequences of the budget cuts.

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<http://www.wsws.org>