

New York City homeless crisis results in deaths of two toddlers

By Steve Light
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Two children of a homeless family living in temporary housing provided by the City of New York died from steam burns last Wednesday when the valve of the heat radiator blew off and steam at 212° Fahrenheit scorched them.

While Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio described the tragedy as “freakish,” the lack of affordable, decent housing and a growing homeless population in underfunded, unsafe shelters creates accidents waiting to happen.

The parents, Danielle and Peter Ambrose were sleeping in the living room and their daughters, Ibanez, 2, and Scylee, were asleep in the bedroom with the door closed.

They were awakened by the valve blowing off the radiator in the living room at 6 a.m. releasing steam which Peter replaced holding an oven mitt. Danielle went out to do errands while Peter went back to sleep. When Danielle returned at 11 a.m. and opened the door to the bedroom, she discovered the burned children and they ran outside from the apartment, each carrying a child and screaming for help but it was too late.

A previous resident of that apartment, Charlene Jackson, told the Daily News that the valve popped off the same bedroom radiator in August 2015, spewing scalding water and steam, which fortunately spared her two sons the same fate. She moved out the next month.

Neighbors and city officials describe the couple as attentive and loving and their Facebook pages demonstrate that. They had moved to New York from a small town in Maine. Peter found work sometimes as a tattoo artist and house painter while Danielle found employment as a security guard and, being a musician, was reported to have played guitar at Grand Central Terminal for donations to raise some cash, according to the *New York Times*.

The Department of Homeless Services contracts with non-profit organizations to provide temporary shelter in privately owned buildings for about 3000 families in the city. These buildings are part of the cluster-site program.

The program has in the last three years placed dozens of homeless families in buildings owned by at least five landlords who are among the 100 landlords with the highest numbers of building code violations, according to Public Advocate’s office.

The owner of the building where the two sisters died, Moshe Pillar, had reduced his violations after being among those “worst” landlords in 2014 and 2015 but his two cluster sites in the Bronx had racked up 66 open violations each as of Thursday. “Officials said they had not checked the ‘worst landlord’ list before placing families in these buildings through nonprofits they hire to handle the cluster site program,” the *Daily News* reported.

The Ambrose family was part of the record number of homeless in various types of housing in the New York City shelter system – 60,686 people last week, which is 9,216 more than when de Blasio became Mayor in 2014. Almost forty percent are children.

The Bronx, where the Ambrose family was living, is the city’s poorest borough, with a median income of \$32,688. Almost 30 percent of the Bronx’s 1.4 million residents live at or below the poverty line. The borough came in last in a statewide ranking for health and education. Only 18 percent of working-age Bronx residents have a college degree.

“The median price of single-to-three-family homes, co-ops and condominiums was about \$317,000 in the last three months of 2014, \$8,000 less than 10 years ago,” Jonathan Miller, a residential-property appraiser told *Bloomberg News*. “Rents also are compelling. For

\$1,650 you can find a three-bedroom apartment in Mott Haven, the trendiest part of the Bronx, the price of a studio in the eastern-most end of the Upper East Side.” These are still prices that would eat up more than half the annual income of a family of three having an official poverty income of \$20,090.

Omega Bullock, a homeless, single mother in a cluster housing shelter in Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, spoke to the WSWS about the recent tragedy. She has three children ages two, five and eight.

“These deaths were terrible and it is the City’s fault,” Bullock said. “The radiator was complained about several times. No one fixed it. I have a similar situation. My ceiling, which is the roof of the building, fell in during the summer. They have had to come and plaster it six times. It fell in again two weeks ago. They need to spend to fix the roof. I even had to call 311. Recently I had no hot water for three weeks straight.

These problems would be fixed if the landlord was renting to higher-income people. I have been trying to get them to give me a voucher for a Section 8 apartment but they say there are too many people asking for vouchers,” she concluded.

Mayor de Blasio has been bouncing between various promises to terminate the short-term programs for the homeless that have proven ineffective and even harmful. Lack of funding for building sufficient shelters designed to adequately aid families and individual has resulted in overcrowding that has even driven many homeless to prefer to stay on the streets in the cold, in fear of their safety. In addition, those sheltered face requirements that do not allow them to be in the shelter during the daytime. The building of shelters have also been the subject of resistance in some neighborhoods with claims that shelters will lower real estate values and bring drug trafficking.

Meanwhile, the cluster-site housing, which actually takes affordable housing off the market, serves to line the pockets of greedy landlords who profit while not maintaining their buildings, as witnessed by the ghastly death of the two Ambrose sisters. Additionally, the cluster-site program buildings are scattered in the city to cheaper locations where it is more difficult for the city to provide services for those homeless.

City officials have felt forced, by a state law requiring the provision of shelter, to putting up

homeless in hotels, which on average can cost \$6,570 a month, compared to \$2,740 for a cluster apartment, which includes the amount charged by contractors providing services, even if non-profits. These hotel rooms do not have kitchens for the residents. Individuals sheltered in hotels are usually required to double up with strangers. The city is providing almost 6,000 people with 2,418 rooms in hotels, with plans to expand that number by 436 rooms.

Positive feeling toward de Blasio, who touts himself as a leader of progressive Democrats, has begun to sour. He has claimed to be fulfilling a promise to build 200,000 affordable apartments in the city within ten years, using market forces and government incentives to solve the city’s housing crisis. Aside from the inadequate response to a need that has been calculated to be at least 600,000 apartments, more rapidly, the intensifying building of high-rises in the outer boroughs as well as Manhattan has spread gentrification into many low income neighborhoods.

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