

# New York: Elderly woman killed in blaze after fire department cutbacks

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On February 11, a fire at an apartment building in Brooklyn, New York, killed one elderly woman and injured seven other people. The tragedy is compounded by the fact that recent budget cuts affecting the New York Fire Department may have prevented firefighters from putting out the fire in a timely manner so as to avoid casualties and minimize damage.

Just days before the fire, on February 1, the FDNY was forced to reduce staff on 60 of its engine companies. One-hundred thirty firefighters were needed to put out the blaze.

Most residents of the building, located in the working-class neighborhood of East Flatbush, were asleep when the three-alarm fire erupted on the second floor at 6:03 a.m. Three people were rushed to the hospital, two with serious injuries. One of the victims, 70-year-old Claudette Nicolas, was pronounced dead at Brookdale Hospital after she was found in the living room of her second-floor apartment. Another elderly woman was treated for smoke inhalation and is now in stable condition. Several firefighters were also injured when the floor beneath them collapsed. Many residents were rescued from fire escapes and the roof of the building, with dozens forced out into the bitter cold.

“We couldn’t make it through the front door, so we just went to the fire escape. There was smoke everywhere,” one building resident told *NY1* television station. “We realized it was a fire, and I got my family members and we got out of the building,” said another. “When we got down to the lobby, the whole building was full of black smoke.”

At least four units in the building are now completely uninhabitable due to the fire. Fifty people were displaced by the blaze and are being assisted by the Red Cross. While the cause of the fire is still under

investigation, several residents have said that heating in the building had been very low, forcing them to use space heaters to stay warm. The building is now being heated by a mobile boiler unit that has been set up outside, near the front entrance.

Heating is one of the major causes of residential fires across the country. The use of portable heaters in particular has produced one tragedy after another. Faced with the rising cost of gas and electricity, many families have no choice but to use such heaters to keep warm during the winter.

The firefighters who responded to the blaze were from one of the 60 busy engine companies that have reduced the number of staff members from five to four, in line with other engine companies across the city. The staff cuts went into effect on February 1, after the expiration of a 15-year agreement between the FDNY and the Uniformed Firefighters Association (UFA). The FDNY had proposed the staffing reduction in last year’s budget, and the UFA had been informed many months ago that it would not be continuing the agreement, known as “Roster Staffing,” which supplied the “fifth” firefighter on 60 of the city’s 194 engine companies.

Hours after the contract expired, the UFA, along with the Uniformed Fire Officers Association (UFOA), filed legal papers before the city’s Office of Collective Bargaining to prevent Mayor Michael Bloomberg from cutting firefighter staff at many of the busiest firehouses across the city.

According to the *Queens Courier*, “The city has in the last seven years reduced the 60 engine staffing level four times due to high rates of firefighter medical leave, a change provided for in the original 1996 Roster Staffing agreement.”

The high rate of firefighter medical leave is due to the grueling nature of the job. Firefighting has been associated with cardiovascular diseases such as coronary artery disease. Firefighters face an increased risk of such diseases from exposure to toxic gases, especially carbon monoxide. Stress, heat stress, and heavy physical exertion also take their toll on the health of firefighters.

One man who spoke to firefighters at the scene of the East Flatbush blaze believed that the new staffing rules might have impeded the FDNY's efforts to put out the fire. Daniel Goodine, a resident of the neighborhood, said that one of the firefighters told him that work is strenuous and exhausting without the fifth man.

The delayed response to the blaze angered many local residents. "They [firefighters] did come late. They told us it took them 10 to 15 minutes to come," one neighbor told *Press TV*. "There were about four or five firefighters per truck, which was not enough to put out the blaze. It spread quicker because there weren't enough firefighters," she added. "My feeling is that they should address it and try to put the right number of personnel back in the firehouses," said another man.

"When you're fighting a fire this size and looking for someone to be on the end of the line and there's a lot of pressure, and you're tugging line to save a life inside, and your partner's not there. This is something that we've got to talk about," Goodine told *NY1*.

According to studies conducted by the Fire Department, it takes fire trucks staffed with four firefighters twice as long to put water on a fire as trucks staffed with five.

According to UFA president Steve Cassidy, "Reducing engine company staffing by one firefighter doubles the time it takes to begin getting water on a fire and allows fires to double in size every minute. The mayor is playing Russian roulette with New Yorkers' lives." Cassidy warned that the city will face larger fires now that the staffing cuts have been implemented.

Hoping to avoid a public outcry, the FDNY has denied that the recent budget cuts were responsible for delay in putting out the fire. "The changes in staffing levels had nothing to do with this unfortunate tragedy," said FDNY spokesman Frank Gibbon. "These guys did about as good of a job as could be done." Gibbon also

said that reducing staff on all the engines from five to four is "preferable to closing firehouses." The new staffing rules will save the city \$30 million in overtime. Both the fire department and the Bloomberg administration are determined to cut spending, to the detriment of ordinary New Yorkers. Bloomberg has insisted that the FDNY reduce spending and is pressuring other city departments to do the same.

The mayor and FDNY officials are warning that firehouses will be closed if the city loses the lawsuit that would keep fire department staff at current levels. The UFA has not stated what measures it will take if it loses its case against the Bloomberg administration.

Bloomberg and the entire political establishment are determined to make working people pay for the economic crisis generated by the corporate-financial elite. Drastic cutbacks are being imposed to reduce the ballooning city and state budget deficits. Education, affordable housing and health care are all coming under attack by both big business parties. Earlier this month, the New York Department of Education's Panel for Educational Policy, the majority of whose members were appointed by Mayor Bloomberg, voted to close 22 public schools, outraging teachers, parents, and students around the city.

The city's cutbacks to the fire department will undoubtedly result in more needless deaths and injuries in the coming months and years.



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