



## DES PLAINES FIRE DEPARTMENT

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### JAN. 27 FATAL FIRE AT 714 W. OAKTON ST., DES PLAINES REVIEW OF THE INCIDENT AND FIRE DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

##### Overview

The Des Plaines Fire Department (DPFD) conducted an investigation into the deadly fire at 714 W. Oakton St. in Des Plaines that claimed the lives of five residents on Jan. 27, 2021. The 25-year-old mother, Cythaly Zamudio, along with her four daughters, Renata Espinosa (6); Genesis Espinosa (5); Allizon Espinosa (3); and Grace Espinosa (1), all died in the fire at the single-family wood frame home that was converted into four separate units. The DPFD led the investigation with assistance from the Office of the State Fire Marshal and the MABAS Division 3 Investigation Team. DPFD has released a 43-page report that provides information on conditions prior to the fire, the 911 calls and dispatches to the incident, the response itself, actions taken on the scene and post incident actions to provide factual context directly related to the incident. The full report is available on the [City's website](#), along with a time lapse video using surveillance and police camera video. This document is intended to provide a high-level summary of the findings in the DPFD report.

##### Investigation

The investigation included review of police body camera video, video from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) of Greater Chicago (located directly across the street from the scene), along with interviews, review of 911 calls and on-scene damage assessment.

The MWRD video provided investigators valuable information as to a more definitive timeline of events prior to the 911 calls.

##### Incident Response and Timeline

Based on video surveillance, the report concludes that the fire started well before the first 911 call was made. **See timeline on page four.**

- A Des Plaines Police officer arrived three minutes after the incident was dispatched.
- The first fire engine and ambulance arrived four minutes after dispatch.
- Additional resources were dispatched over the course of the incident.
- Within three minutes of the arrival of the first emergency responders and equipment, a total of 20 personnel arrived at the scene.
- A total of 36 personnel were on the scene at the time the first victim was removed from the building, including two engines, one squad (engine w/additional equipment), two ladder trucks, five ambulances, three battalion chiefs, multiple additional chief officers, and others.

## Dispatch Information

Northwest Central Dispatch (NWCD) received the first 911 call reporting “a house on fire” and transferred the call to the Regional Emergency Dispatch (RED) Center. The dispatcher was able to identify an approximate location and DPFD was dispatched to “Smoke from a Building,” sending two engines, one ladder truck, one ambulance and two Battalion Chiefs. Upon receiving additional 911 calls over the next few minutes with more information, RED Center upgraded the incident to a “Working Fire,” which added two engines, two ladder trucks, three ambulances, one Battalion Chief, two DPFD Deputy Chiefs and the Fire Chief to the response.

## 911 Process – From Call to Dispatch

Des Plaines Police and Fire Departments are dispatched by two different agencies; 911 calls predominately come through one location and then are transferred when FIRE/EMS is needed.

1. 911 call placed in Des Plaines
2. Answered at the Wheeling 911 Center
3. 911 caller asked a short set of questions
4. If call is for FIRE/EMS, it's transferred to RED Center.
5. The RED dispatcher asks caller questions and dispatches DPFD resources based on available information.

Note: 911 calls made from a cell phone may be answered by a neighboring community depending on the cell tower that the call is routed through. They are then transferred to either Wheeling 911 or RED Center as quickly as possible.

## Mutual Aid Resources

The following communities provided support to this incident through mutual aid agreements:

- Mount Prospect
- Rosemont
- Park Ridge
- Bensenville
- Prospect Heights
- Elk Grove

Many communities rely on assistance from other agencies whether it is fire, police and public works. Availability of resources from neighboring communities is dependent on activities of the agency at that precise moment.

## Building/Code Enforcement Information

The building is a 104-year old single-family wood frame home that was annexed into the City in 1973. Prior to annexation, it was divided into multi-family units. Therefore, it is allowed under the City Code of Ordinances as a legal non-confirming use. This is very common in many older suburban communities. On the date of the incident, the building contained four separate apartment units, two on the first floor, one in the basement, and one on the second floor.

The property was registered with the City as rental property. Records show the property is owned by Manuel Espinoza. The property has a long history of property maintenance code enforcement violations, as the result of resident and neighbor complaints. For example, illegal burning, unregistered vehicles and debris. There is currently an active code enforcement case pending. The City also issued a violation notice with the property owner for operating a landscaping business, which is not permitted in this zoning district. The City currently does not have any building code violations pending, which would relate to the construction and occupancy of the building, nor has it received complaints regarding potential violations for the interior of the property. The City last inspected the property in 2018, as required for a resale. At that time, it met all of the inspection requirements (for both interior and exterior), including the required amount of smoke and CO detectors.

## **Fire Suppression and Rescue Operations**

The MRWD and police body camera video illustrate that when fire and police personnel arrived on the scene and when trying to gain access to the second-floor unit, they encountered significant smoke and fire conditions. Using water suppression, they successfully knocked down the bulk of the fire and searched for occupants in heavy smoke. Crews found the first victim in the bedroom and within seconds, found the five victims in the same room. Firefighters made a valiant effort to give the victims a chance to survive by locating them and removing them from the hazardous conditions. Also, thanks to the efforts of a passerby and two police officers, two occupants of the building were safely removed from the building and did not suffer injuries.

While the interior fire suppression and searches were underway, additional crews were focused on exterior operations. Crews attempted to enter second-floor windows on the west side, however due to conditions they were unable to enter either room from those windows. Other personnel broke windows to allow for ventilation in an attempt improve conditions. Crews also used a thermal imaging camera to determine whether or not there were any victims in the immediate area.

DPFD investigators found that Fire/EMS operations were challenged by a rapidly evolving scene, including a rapid acceleration of the number of victims beyond what was expected (based on initial reports). Additionally, firefighters were challenged by the single point of entry – a door that led to a stairwell to the upstairs apartment from the rear of the building. The investigation and damage assessment revealed that the fire originated at the top of the stairs into the second-floor unit. This unit had a second point of exit; however, it was to a small balcony on the east side of the building without stairs to the ground level.

The DPFD continues to investigate the origin of the fire, which started in the stairwell. A space heater and extension cord were found in that immediate area.

The report concludes the DPFD operated professionally, bravely and effectively. They performed their duties to the best of their abilities in their attempts to save the lives of the five victims.

DPFD's handling and response to this incident satisfied the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards (best practices) regarding fire suppression operations, medical operations and special operations to the public.

This type of incident has a traumatic effect not only the fire/EMS responders, it also impacts police officers, investigators, hospital personnel, dispatchers, medical examiners, support personnel, witnesses, civilians – and their families – and the community as a whole. Resources were immediately made available to DPFD and continue to be available.

## **Recommended Items for Further Examination and Evaluation**

After any incident, DPFD (and all public safety agencies) use lessons learned to improve operations. The report identifies these areas for additional examination and evaluation:

### **Dispatch and Communications**

(911 call taking processes, interoperability of dispatch centers and DPPD and DPFD)

### **Standard Operating Guidelines/Procedures (Fire Ground Operations)**

### **Automatic/Mutual Aid**

(Resources/availability; multi-department training)

### **Building Codes, Enforcement, & Public Awareness**

(Review existing ordinances/codes for opportunities to prevent similar situations; Review and evaluate inspections of multiple dwelling units; Examine and provide public awareness campaigns regarding smoke detectors, fire alarm systems, sprinkler systems, means of egress and entry, etc.)

## JAN. 27 OAKTON ST. FIRE SUMMARY TIMELINE

**10:03 a.m.**

Video shows bright flash in 2nd floor

**10:08 a.m.**

First signs of smoke; Based on these conditions & known fire behavior, it's very possible that the fire had been burning for several minutes before the 911 call.

**10:10 a.m.**

First 911 call answered at NWCD; transferred to RED Center.

**10:11 a.m.**

911 call answered at RED Center; more smoke visible on video.

**10:13 a.m.**

RED Center dispatches as "Smoke from a building."

**10:15 a.m.**

2 more 911 calls; RED Center upgrades to "working fire."

**10:16 a.m.**

Des Plaines Police officer arrives (body cam shot).

Police vehicle completely obscured by smoke.



**10:17 a.m.**

First engine and ambulance arrive 4 minutes after dispatch; View of building completely obscured; Police officer makes contact with 1<sup>st</sup> floor occupant at rear of building.

**10:18 a.m.**

Des Plaines officer & Metra officer (passerby) gain access entry to basement & 1<sup>st</sup> floor west unit.

**10:19 a.m.**

Firefighter forces 2nd floor entry door from rear of building—only entry into the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment, through a stairway.

Basement apartment occupant exits the building.

**10:20 a.m.**

Fire consumes entry to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor; Firefighters attempt to extinguish fire with water.

Total of 20 personnel at the scene.



**10:21 a.m.**

Firefighters make entry into 2<sup>nd</sup> floor unit.

**10:23 a.m.**

Crews perform the Vent/Enter/Isolate/Search (VEIS) technique from the west side of the building through 2<sup>nd</sup> floor windows; due to conditions they were unable to enter either room from those windows.

**10:30-10:32 a.m.**

All 5 victims removed.

Victims treated on scene; 4 victims transported; one pronounced deceased at the scene.

**10:46 a.m.**

Last ambulance transporting a victim left the scene.

\*See report for exact times to the millisecond.

