

Tragedies feed drive for smoke detectors

Heat may have destroyed any device in heroic dad's home.

By Jocelyn Wiener - Bee Staff Writer

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Fire investigators may never know for certain whether there was a working smoke detector in unit No. 56 of the Bentley Place apartments.

The deadly blaze that rolled through the second-story unit in Arden Manor before 6:15 a.m. Saturday was intense enough that it may have completely devoured the smoke alarm, fire officials said.

Capt. Jeff Lynch of the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District said Monday that investigators have ruled out arson as a cause of the fire that killed 18-month-old Kayla Marie Johnson and 7-month-old Oraysheon Johnson. Their father, whom the apartment manager identified as 23-year-old Antwane Johnson, died after he rushed back in with a fire extinguisher to try to save them.

Lynch said detectives were unable to find any evidence of a smoke detector.

Investigators who checked 31 of the apartments Saturday said that in 16 of them, a smoke detector was either nonexistent or inoperable. They sent a letter to the owner and manager of the complex, Lynch said, requiring that all units have working smoke detectors by 10 a.m. Sunday. A walk-through with the manager on Sunday showed that all 60 units had them, he said.

Saturday's deadly blaze – and a second one Saturday night that ripped through a mobile home on Auburn Boulevard and left a man in critical condition – underscores

the life-and-death importance of smoke detectors, fire officials said.

Capt. Jim Doucette, spokesman for the Sacramento Fire Department, said investigators assume the victim of the mobile home fire had no smoke detector.

Two weeks ago, Sacramento's mayor and fire officials announced the formation of a task force to try to ensure that every dwelling in Sacramento has a smoke alarm.

That task force was announced in response to a fire that rolled through a south Sacramento home Jan. 6, claiming the lives of a 9-year-old girl and her 7-year-old brother.

Doucette said officials are trying to encourage people to get smoke detectors by appeals through the media, schools and a flier that will be included with utility bills next month. So far, 1,600 smoke alarms have been donated, and Doucette expects the department may ultimately receive as many as 50,000. He is helping coordinate volunteers who will fan out to residences to install the detectors. The department has already received 100 to 150 calls for the alarms.

Lynch of the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District, which responded to Saturday's fire, said his department has been running public service announcements in movie theaters, on local buses and on the radio, urging people to install detectors.

Others in the community are advocating that the city and county pass ordinances requiring regular inspections of all rental housing units.

Rachel Iskow, executive director of the Sacramento Mutual Housing Association, said such an ordinance would allow inspectors to check which homes have working smoking detectors. Inspectors would also look for problems that cause fires – exposed electrical wiring, broken water heaters and other hazards, she said.

The city of Sacramento rejected such an ordinance last year. As the one-year anniversary of that decision approaches, Iskow and some city officials are asking the council to reconsider their decision.

At a news conference Wednesday, Iskow and a handful of community leaders will join the three City Council members who originally voted for the ordinance – Bonnie Pannell, Lauren Hammond and Kevin McCarty – in calling for a new vote.

"People are dying, so hopefully people will take a second look," McCarty said Monday.

He said he intends to bring the issue before the council this spring.

The building where Antwane Johnson and his babies died was in county territory, and so would not be covered by a city ordinance. But Iskow said she intends to bring a similar proposed ordinance to the county Board of Supervisors as well.

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