

Wrongful-death lawsuit filed in 2014 fire that killed five kids in Minneapolis

Landlord blamed for faulty conditions at north Minneapolis duplex.

By Eric Roper (<http://www.startribune.com/eric-roper/62906482/>) Star Tribune |

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A new wrongful-death suit blames a landlord for the 2014 deaths of five children in a north Minneapolis fire, one of the deadliest fires in the country last year.

The lawsuit, filed Friday, claims the children's deaths could have been prevented had it not been for inadequate smoke alarms, heating systems, electrical outlets, escape points and mechanical systems in the Colfax Avenue duplex owned by Paul Bertelson and his company, Mission Inn Minnesota.

Two children and their father, Troy Lewis, survived the blaze, which tore through the home in the early morning hours of Valentine's Day.

"We believe through our experts that we can show ... and prove that the building had some deficiencies that were required by the code that would have made the difference between life and death," said attorney Jeff Sieben, who is representing the family.

The cause of the fire was never officially determined, but it appeared to have started near a space heater in the living room.

"We believe it's an electrical cause from the receptacle where the space heater was plugged in," Sieben said Tuesday.

"We isolated the area where the fire originated," he added. "But it's about more than that. ... It's about keeping your property safe and following the codes that are established for buildings that are rented out."

An attorney representing Bertelson, Bill Moran, declined to comment on the suit.

The lawsuit claims that the property lacked "functioning and or adequate smoke alarms," that it had heating systems that "led to inadequate heating of habitable rooms" and that it lacked a proper escape route for an "over-occupied attic."



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_139286388029663.jpg)

ELIZABETH FLORES

In 2014, Ron Rahman, from the state fire

The suit also alleges that the house lacked proper mechanical systems and that it contained electrical components out of compliance with the city's electrical code.

After the fire, Troy Lewis blamed Bertelson for not providing sufficient heat — the reason for the space heater. Bertelson responded at the time that his company never received calls about the heat, nor did Lewis raise the issue in a face-to-face meeting.

Several of the children who died in the blaze were trapped in third-floor attic bedrooms, left without escape routes after the fire destroyed the only stairwell.

The victims ranged in age from 18 months to 8 years.

The two surviving children, Electra and Shaca Lewis, were 5 and 9 at the time of the fire. They are parties in the lawsuit, along with their father. Sieben said they are now living in Chicago, where they just started school.

The fire was one of 24 in the U.S. last year that killed five or more people, according to a September report from the National Fire Protection Association. Of those 24, 15 were located in homes.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1445392012)

The Lewis family children included, in front, Troy, left, and Electra. In back, from left: Mary, Fannie, Christopher, Gwendolyn and Shaca. Only Electr...