

# IDHS NEWS



## Indiana Department of Homeland Security

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### South Bend fatal fire cause ruled undetermined

Investigators with the Office of the Indiana State Fire Marshal announced Wednesday the cause of the tragic fire in January 2024 that claimed the lives of six South Bend children cannot be determined at this time.

The “Undetermined” ruling is a standard determination in fire investigations when a definitive cause cannot be established based on available evidence. In the case of the Jan. 21 fire at 222 LaPorte Ave. in South Bend, a clear cause of the blaze could not be determined, despite nearly a year of intense investigation and analysis by the Indiana State Fire Marshal’s Office, South Bend Fire Department and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF).

“In an investigation of this magnitude, it is normal and expected for the community to want clear answers as to what started this fire,” State Fire Marshal Steve Jones said. “Unfortunately, those are not always available due to the nature of the incident, the extensive fire damage to the scene and the lack of scientific evidence once the fire was extinguished.”

The fire is one of the largest fatal fires ever to occur in South Bend and the surrounding community. From the family and friends to leadership and first responders, the LaPorte Avenue fire will be felt deeply for years to come.

The fire claimed the lives of Faith Smith, 2; Deangelo Smith, 4; Deontay Smith, 5; Davida Smith, 9; Demetrius Smith, 10; and Angel Smith, 11.

“Communities such as ours are strengthened by how they overcome adversity and come together to support one another after tragic events,” South Bend Fire Chief Carl Buchanon said. “Working

together through public education and fire prevention will help these events from occurring more often, and that remains the top priority of the dedicated men and women of the South Bend Fire Department.”

At a press conference held today (Dec. 11), Jones detailed some findings from the investigation, as he stressed the evidence shows no indication of criminal activity or arson.

Among the findings of the investigation:

- The fire originated in the first-floor family/dining room. At the time, all occupants were upstairs.
- The fire went unnoticed for several minutes and gained intensity on the first floor.
- Surveillance video shows the fire starting at 6:08 p.m. The first 911 call was received at 6:14 p.m. Rescue crews arrived at 6:17 p.m.
- Electrical items were identified as one possible ignition source, but this could not be proven definitively as starting the fire.
- Smoke detectors were found in the home, but the surviving father, arriving responders, 911 dispatchers and other witnesses did not report hearing smoke alarms.
- No evidence of criminal activity was found.
- [Timeline photos attached.](#)



The ruling on the cause of the fire can be amended should new evidence become available, Jones said.

Investigation reports are not public record and will be released through proper legal channels when appropriate. Additional requests may be submitted through the APRA portal on the [IDHS website](#) or

directly at <https://in.accessgov.com/dhs-apra>.

Fire personnel encouraged the public to ensure smoke alarms are installed at every level of the home and tested regularly. In addition, families should discuss what to do if a fire occurs and practice an escape plan. The U.S. Fire Administration estimates residents could have less than two minutes to escape a home once the fire starts or a smoke alarm sounds.

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