April 23, 2021

The Honorable David E. Price  
House Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies  
2358-A Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Price,

On behalf of the Minneapolis Fire Department, I am writing to share my enthusiastic support for the request by Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) for Community Project Funding. If awarded, the funding will greatly assist MPHA in their efforts to retrofit public high-rise buildings with sprinklers for fire suppression.

Many high-rise buildings in Minneapolis were built before fire codes required sprinkler systems. Sadly, we have seen fires and loss of life that we believe could have been prevented by having a proper sprinkler system in place. There’s an urgent need to retrofit these buildings, but inadequate resources. Partners have been scrambling to fund these projects, but your support would go a long way to meet the need.

There’s nothing more fundamental to the mission of the Minneapolis Fire Department than protecting lives. We believe these investments are critical to prevent harm and loss of life.

Thank you for your consideration,

[Signature]

Bryan D. Tyner, CFO  
Fire Chief  
Minneapolis Fire Department
April 26, 2021

The Honorable David E. Price
House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies
2358-A Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Price,

The City of Minneapolis is very pleased to support the Community Project Funding request of Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) for sprinkler installation. Many high-rise buildings in the MPHA portfolio were built before fire codes required sprinkler systems and they now require retrofitting to address critical life and safety issues.

The City strongly supports additional resources for fire suppression in public housing units and recently committed $1 million to MPHA for this purpose, allowing MPHA to also leverage funds from the State. Along with MPHA’s contribution, that investment will support the retrofit of 656 units. Yet, the need far exceeds what partners have been able to do so far and MPHA has identified an immediate need to retrofit another 600+ units in 10 buildings.

We would appreciate your support for this effort which will produce tangible and near-term result and reduce the risks of fire in public housing.

Thank you for your consideration,

[Signature]
Community Planning and Economic Development
Executive Director
MINNEAPOLIS

Few sprinklers, outdated stairwells key factors in deadly 2019 high-rise fire in Minneapolis, state says

Cedar-Riverside high-rise still lacks sprinkler system a year after fire killed five.

By Liz Navratil (https://www.startribune.com/liz-navratil/6370437/) Star Tribune

OCTOBER 27, 2020 — 10:01PM

A lack of extensive sprinklers, an outdated stairwell design and a seal that prevented a door from closing contributed to the spread of the fire that killed five people in the Cedar High Apartments (https://www.startribune.com/cedar-riverside-high-rise-fire/565785691/) last year, according to a new state report.

The Minnesota Department of Public Safety's Fire Marshal Division (SFMD) on Tuesday released an 18-page report recommending multiple changes (https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/sfm/mfs/Documents/Reports-Folder/Lessons-Learned-630-Cedar-Ave.pdf), as a result of its investigation into the Nov. 27, 2019, fire in the high-rise building run by the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.

"This tragic loss of life could have been prevented. The victims would still be alive had there been sprinklers throughout that entire building," State Fire Marshal Jim Smith said in a statement. "We owe it to the victims and their families to learn from this fire so we can prevent similar tragedies."

The 25-story building at 630 S. Cedar Av. had sprinklers in the basement area and some common spaces on the first floor. It did not have them throughout the entire building, which was built 50 years ago.

The fire marshal's division, in its report, said that in 63 of 65 "sprinkler saves" recorded in high-rise buildings between 2004 and 2019, the fire was controlled with one or two sprinklers.

"It is the SFMD's position that all high-rise buildings should be protected with fire sprinkler systems," the report said. "Had this building been protected with fire sprinklers, it is the opinion of the SFMD that no loss of life would have occurred."

The Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) said its executive director, Abdi Warsame, was not available to discuss specifics of the report, its recommendations or the fire. When the fire happened, Warsame was a Minneapolis City Council member whose ward included the high-rise. He spent that morning last year meeting with grieving, traumatized residents.

In a statement Tuesday, the authority said it was reviewing the fire marshal's report.

It said in-unit sprinklers "remain a top priority" and that MPHA has a plan to install complete sprinkler systems in all of its high-rise buildings within 10 years "given sufficient funding."

"Decades of federal underfunding have left MPHA with a need of more than $150 million of essential repairs and updates to its 6,000 public housing units," the statement said. "Against this, the agency receives approximately $15 million annually for capital repairs from Congress."

MPHA's plan calls for adding sprinklers to six more buildings in 2021, though not the building where the fatal fire occurred.

The fire marshal's report also recommends other changes for high-rise buildings throughout the state, based on how the fire in Cedar-Riverside spread.
The office suggested installing a fire separation barrier inside buildings with "scissor stairs," such as the Cedar High Apartments, or installing sprinklers throughout the building. The term "scissor stairs" refers to a design where multiple doorways open into a single shaft, containing multiple staircases.

"Since both stairways are located within the same enclosure, or 'shaft,' a single open door can quickly compromise both stairs, which are the only paths of egress from the upper stories of the building," the report said.

The report described that as "a design practice from decades ago — especially in high-rise buildings — to save space and the cost of building a second enclosure. Unfortunately, this practice was incongruent with the safe egress concept of having two ways out in an emergency."

Based on burn patterns, investigators also suspect that the door to the apartment where the fire began was open.

"Had the door been closed, the smoke and heat spread from the apartment into the corridor and ultimately into the scissor stair enclosure would have been limited," the report said.

"Although the corridor/apartment separation doors were equipped with self-closing devices, the closing feature was rendered ineffective by the placement of seals at the bottom of the doors that prevented the doors from closing. Although the exact reason for the seals is unknown, it is presumed that they were to prevent infestation spread or to prevent loss of heat from the individual apartment."

The report did not say who placed the seals on the doors, and MPHA did not answer that question.

The report also noted that a window failed, likely due to the heat, and strong winds created a "wind-driven fire" that, together with the open door, contributed to the fire's spread.

The fire killed Amatalah Adam, 79; Maryan Mohamud, 69; Nadifa Mohamud, 67; Jerome Stuart, 59; and Tyler Scott Baron, 32. All died of smoke inhalation.

Liz Navratil covers Minneapolis City Hall for the Star Tribune. She previously worked in Pennsylvania, where she covered state government and crime — and sometimes both at once. She was part of the team that won a 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting.

liz.navratil@startribune.com  612-673-4994  lnavratil
MPHA Statement on Today’s Fire at 630 Avenue

This has been a shocking and sad day for MPHA, with a high-rise fire that has taken five lives. MPHA is thankful to all of the community members who offered support, food, counseling, and other resources on this difficult day. We can report at day’s end that MPHA has provided immediate housing for any families displaced by the event.
Everyone at MPHA is grieving over the tragic fire here early this morning. We are focused on assisting the families of the victims and helping the community here at the Cedars through a terribly difficult time. In the days to come, we will be working closely with the Minneapolis fire department to learn everything we can about what happened.

This event is unprecedented in MPHA's history. There are not words to express our sense of loss for the residents that our staff see every day. We consider them friends, and care for them deeply. We also have in our thoughts the firefighter who was injured in the course of duty this morning, and express our gratitude for all of the first responders.

We have 191 apartments in this 25-story building. We are grateful that most of them were not affected and residents have returned to their homes. We have to await the results of investigations to understand the cause of the fire.

We have determined that a very limited number of units are uninhabitable because of the fire or water damage. At this time, we estimate fewer than 10 households are temporarily displaced, and MPHA is able to accommodate all of them in units that MPHA has immediately available.

I want to thank the MPHA Board of Commissioners, Council Member Warsame, and Representative Noor for their work today comforting and coordinating with residents. I have been in touch today with Mayor Frey – he is unable to join us today, but representatives of his office are here and we are glad for their support, along with the city's department of Community Planning and Economic Development.

By Jeff Horwich | November 27th, 2019 | News | Comments Off

About the Author: Jeff Horwich

https://mphaonline.org/mpha-statement-on-todays-fire-at-630-cedar-avenue/
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