TULSA WORLD

# Lawsuit blames deadly fire on city agency, lighter importer

## The first lawsuit filed over a Christmas tree fire that killed 12 family members faults the Philadelphia Housing Agency for lax oversight of the property

**By MARYCLAIRE DALE - Associated Press**

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FILE - A passer-by looks over the barricade on the street of a deadly fire in the Fairmount neighborhood of Philadelphia, Jan. 6, 2022. The fire happened the day prior. On Tuesday, March 14, 2023, the first lawsuit was filed over a Christmas tree fire in Philadelphia that killed 12 members of an extended family and accuses the city's Housing Agency of lax oversight of the three-story rowhouse and a California company of distributing an unsafe pocket lighter that children can easily use.

By MARYCLAIRE DALE - Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The first lawsuit filed over **a Christmas tree fire** in Philadelphia — which killed 12 members of an extended family last winter — accuses the city's Housing Agency of lax oversight of the three-story rowhouse and a California company of distributing an unsafe **pocket lighter** that children can easily use.

**Lawyer Thomas Kline said Tuesday that the city housing agency let too many people to live in the unit, failed to hard-wire smoke detectors to prevent people from removing the batteries and failed to ensure that occupants of the upper floors had an escape route. Three sisters and their nine children died in the January 2022 fire.**

**"They had a property that failed inspections in 2015 and 2017. They knew it was dangerous and knew that there were missing and inoperable smoke detectors," Kline said. "They ignored every warning sign that you could possibly ignore."**

**And he called the colorful Techno Torch pocket lighter “an attractive nuisance to a child.”**

**“The lighter didn't contain adequate safety features that would prevent a 5-year-old from igniting flames, which is exactly, tragically, what happened here," Kline said Tuesday, the day the first of several expected lawsuits over the deaths was filed.**

The victims were all on the third floor of a brick duplex owned by the housing agency near the Philadelphia Museum of Art. As many as 14 people had lived in the upstairs four-bedroom unit at times, as the family grew over the decade they lived there.

The housing agency declined to comment Tuesday on the pending litigation.

“This was an intact family who chose to live together. We don’t kick out our family members ... who might not have other suitable housing options,” Kelvin Jeremiah, president and CEO of the agency, said after the fire, while adding that “all of us at PHA are shaken.”

The three adult sisters who perished were Rosalee McDonald, Virginia Thomas and Quinsha White. Kline represents some of their survivors, including their mother Vanessa McDonald, who lost nine grandchildren.

Federal investigators identified the lighter involved as a Techno Torch lighter distributed by California-based Enor International Inc. The company's founder, Peter Chen, said told The Associated Press by phone that he was not aware of the fire and had not seen the lawsuit.

He said the product was manufactured in China and approved by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

“In order for us to bring the lighters in,” he said, “the lighter has to comply with the consumer safety commission.”

The nine children killed in the fire were: Destiny McDonald, Quintien Tate-McDonald, Janiyah Roberts, Dekwan Robinson, J’Kwan Robinson, Taniesha Robinson, Tiffany Robinson, Natasha Wayne and Shaniece Wayne. The 5-year-old who authorities believe was playing with the lighter survived.