

## 17 Firefighters Sued for Taking a Selfie in Front of Burning Home



The infamous photo of Detroit firefighters posing in front of a flaming house has triggered a lawsuit, with the homeowner accusing the fire crew of "gross negligence" and failing to perform their duties.

The owner of the southwest Detroit house where a crew of 17 firefighters posed for a photo as the structure burned on New Year's Eve, Deonte Higginbotham, filed a negligence lawsuit Tuesday against the Detroit Fire Department and the City of Detroit.

The homeowner claims that the firefighters didn't care about saving his home because he lives in a black neighborhood.

He also states, firefighters never apologized for the "outrageous image of 17 white firefighters posing and smiling" while his "fully engulfed home burned to the ground."

"The photo seen around the world is symbolic of white law enforcement's abject disrespect for the welfare of black American families like the Higginbothams," states the 21-page suit.

The lawsuit claims intentional infliction of emotional distress and demands at least \$25,000 in damages. The South Green Street home had been in Higginbotham's family for more than 50 years and was undergoing "large-scale" renovations totaling at least \$100,000.

"I've lived in it my whole life," growing up there with two older brothers and an older sister, Higginbotham told the New York Post.

The photo was published by the Detroit Fire Incidents Facebook page, on December 31, shortly before midnight, with the caption: "Crews take a moment to get a selfie on New Year's!"

While the house was empty at the time of the fire, the lawsuit states that the fire crew knew that the house was not abandoned nor vacant, and didn't do enough to save it.

Higginbotham told the Post, he lived in the house his whole life with his 70-year-old mother who is suffering from Alzheimer's, two older brothers, and an older sister.

"She's really sick right now," he said of his mother. "We were trying to get the house remodeled" to accommodate her illness, he said. "She's staying with family" elsewhere in Detroit, he added.

"She doesn't know about the fire," he said. "I don't even want to tell her." Higginbotham's neighbors who witnessed the incident told him that the fire crew barely bothered to hit the house with water, Higginbotham said. City fire officials said the house and nearby homes were vacant and the crew was marking a colleague's retirement.

However, the filing stated that "At no time relevant to this matter was the Green family residence ever abandoned or vacant, (a) fact known and ignored by the Defendant firefighters."

Detroit Fire Commissioner Eric Jones condemned the photo and the smoke eaters' behavior "inappropriate and unprofessional" and a "momentary lapse in judgment," he told The News.

Jones has previously stated that the firefighters tried to enter the building, but realized they couldn't because it wasn't structurally sound.

The plaintiff's attorney, Steve Haney, said in a statement announcing the lawsuit that this is a horrible look for Detroit and points to the racial inequality.

"It is very hard to ignore the racial reality this would not have happened in a different neighborhood."

"The outrageous image of 17 white firefighters posing and smiling while a black families [sic] fully engulfed and occupied home burned to the ground made international news," attorney Steve Haney wrote.

A protest over the December 31 fire is scheduled for 4 p.m. Thursday in front of Detroit City Hall.

