

# CHA settles with woman's family for \$5.75 mil.

BY LISA DONOVAN  
Staff Reporter

An employee working at CHA's Harold Ickes public housing complex admitted she falsified a report claiming there were smoke detectors in the apartment where a fire killed a mother of six and her youngest, a 16-month-old boy, in 2001, attorneys for the family said.

The admission may have been pivotal in the \$5.75 million settlement reached Monday between the Chicago Housing Authority, along with the private agency that manages the South Side complex, and relatives of 29-year-old Shlonzo Burnett and her son, Michael Cross.

"If the evidence wasn't there, they wouldn't have settled," the family's attorney, Mark A. Brown, said of the CHA. His firm, Lane and Lane, represents the surviving children, who attended a downtown news conference Monday.

Their uncle, Rahshone Burnett, is raising four of his late sister's surviving children.

"You can't put a price on my sister or my nephew," he said, surrounded by the three boys and a girl ranging in ages from 10 to 17. A fifth child, an 8-year-old girl, is living with her father's aunt.

The children didn't wish to speak, but Burnett said the money will be used to pay for their education and any other needs they have in the coming years. He said it's a relief to have this "chapter" over, but he talks about how difficult their mother's death has been for them.

"There's been a lot of bad nights," and some of the children have received counseling.



Four of Shlonzo Burnett's children (from left), Tyotis, 17; Krishonna, 13; Shawn, 15; and Darius, stand with their uncle, Rahshone Burnett (right) at a news conference Monday. Shlonzo Burnett (inset photo) died in 2001. —JIM FROST/SUN-TIMES

## Unit's resident complained

Fire investigators determined that two of the children were playing with matches, sparking the August 2001 blaze in the fifth-floor apartment of the Ickes residence at 2310 S. State. Attorneys for the family

say the tragedy could have been averted with an operating smoke detector in the apartment, something CHA officials say is required.

But Brown said there is evidence that in January 2000, more than a year before the fire, a CHA employee who fixed the heat in

that apartment reported there was no smoke detector.

The city Buildings Department cited the housing agency for not having a device in the apartment, and even the resident — the boyfriend of Shlonzo Burnett — had complained, Brown said.

Two months before the blaze, she and her children moved into the apartment to live with her boyfriend, according to the CHA and the family attorney.

## Employee still on the job

In 2005, nearly four years after the blaze, an employee for property manager Woodlawn Community Development Corp. admitted to attorneys for the family that just seven months before the fire she had falsified a report that showed detectors were in place and operating, Brown said.

"I've never inspected a smoke detector" in the time she's worked at the Ickes homes, the 2005 deposition states. That employee remains on the job, according to Brown, who saw her during an inspection of the apartment last week.

Charles Levesque, deputy general counsel for CHA, could not confirm that on Monday. Of the settlement, he said: "We're working to make sure these types of tragedies don't occur in the future."

That includes prompt repairs, including fixing and replacing smoke detectors within 24 hours, something required at the time of the fire.

"When something is deficient in your unit" it is reported "and we're supposed to repair that in 24 hours," Levesque said. "That's our consistent policy. The policy was designed to preclude these kinds of events."

ldonovan@suntimes.com