

Homeless, poor freeze in US cold wave

A team of WSWs correspondents
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The recent cold spell in the central and eastern US has claimed dozens of lives and led to widespread hardship among the poor, the elderly and the homeless. After several exceptionally mild winters, the weather has returned to more normal patterns. The impact of the season's cold wave highlights the desperate conditions facing millions of people in the United States confronted with rising unemployment and the relentless slashing of social services at the federal, state and local level.

The very limited assistance provided to the poor and the homeless is inadequate in many cases to even maintain the bare essentials of life. In cities across the US the winter of 2003 has brought scenes reminiscent of the nineteenth century: people huddled in unheated homes or sleeping on the floor in overcrowded homeless shelters; thousands seeking refuge on door stoops, in alleyways or under bridges.

* In Chicago a reported 19 people have died due to the cold, including at least one homeless man. The city has received scores of calls daily from people needing assistance because of utility shutoffs or malfunctioning heating systems.

* In Philadelphia, three elderly people were found dead from hypothermia and heart problems in unheated homes. Bobby Rivers, 77, Betty Clark, 66, and Delia Brown, 70, were found dead on January 24. Temperatures had been below freezing in Philadelphia since January 14. As of January 13 some 4,322 Philadelphia Gas Works customers had their heat shut off. Pennsylvania's major energy provider claims a computer problem is behind a delay in the processing of some 69,000 applications for federal heating assistance.

* In northwest Detroit a 50-year-old homeless man, Larry Andrews, froze to death January 22. A neighborhood resident found his body under a large cardboard box in an alley. He had attempted to create a shelter under the box, using blankets as walls. He was the second homeless person reported to have frozen to death in Detroit this winter. In December a 70-year-old homeless man died from the cold in southwest Detroit. His body was found in the yard outside a house.

* On January 8 police found a homeless woman frozen to death underneath a bridge in Pascagoula, Mississippi. Annie Abrams, 55, had been living underneath a highway bridge in the center of town since November.

While few figures are kept about cold related deaths of homeless people, the limited statistics available paint a harsh picture. For example, a homeless advocacy group in Boston says a shocking 151 homeless died in that city last winter, including a two-month-old baby. An official for the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless estimates that 60 homeless people die from the cold each year in the Atlanta, Georgia area, a region which enjoys a relatively mild climate compared to the northern US.

These deaths are only the most obvious and striking examples of the suffering inflicted by the cold. In addition, low-wage workers, those

on fixed incomes and the homeless in particular face the danger of frostbite and illness. Detroit Receiving Hospital, for example, reported a number of admissions of homeless people for treatment of frostbite during the week of January 20, including one involving an amputation. In Omaha, Nebraska doctors amputated one hand and the fingers on the other hand of a homeless man suffering frostbite. The man is reportedly in danger of losing his feet as well, as is another homeless man in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Clifford, a Detroit resident, recently became homeless when the city evicted residents of the apartment building where he was staying. The evictions were part of a drive by the administration of Democratic Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and wealthy investors to drive the poor out of downtown areas to make way for upscale development.

Clifford told the WSWs, "A lot of shelters are standing room only. Some people huddle in doorways with blankets or sleep in cardboard boxes. But in this cold a blanket is not going to do any good. The cold makes your mind become disoriented. The only thing that is going to help in this kind of weather is to be inside a warm building.

"The shelters do what they are designed to do, get you out of the cold. They give you a bowl of soup or grits. Then they get you up at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning and send you out. It's freezing that time of morning. You're only thought is to find a place to stay warm, but there is nowhere to go. No one wants to let you inside.

"The way places are charging rent, it is out of my income range. With rent and security deposit it is almost \$1,000 to get a place. If you are getting \$600 a month, you can't afford that. Some places want \$15-25 just to fill out an application. Some want you to get a police clearance."

Clifford added, "I was a veteran. I served from 1971 to 1973. Being a veteran and dealing with the government I see the corruption. In Iraq, what makes them think we can force our way on another country? We wouldn't let them come here and do that to us."

In Pittsburgh, 109 people were recently jammed into one emergency shelter that normally holds 50 to 80 people. One homeless provider reported that he is running out of cots because his supplier, the military, needs them for a possible war against Iraq.

Donna Shaw heads Action Housing Homeless Family Services in McKeesport, Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh. She said, "There has been a definite increase in the number of homeless. Last year, the cold weather shelter [an emergency shelter that opens when temperatures drop below 32 Fahrenheit] was getting half the number of homeless that are coming in this year. There are 120 people there every night and that makes things pretty crowded."

A homeless man from Pittsburgh, who goes by the name Skimmer, commented, "I am getting ready to go out and try and make some money to wash my clothes and buy my cousin some medicine. He is sicker than a dog. I think he might have influenza. He has been sick for two days.

“We don’t have any insurance, so we can’t see a doctor. The only way you can go get any help is if you have a body part falling off you. Otherwise, they ask if you have insurance and if you don’t they don’t want to see you.”

For every person who is homeless there are dozens more who are barely able to keep a roof over their heads. In many cases the high cost of natural gas and heating oil makes it impossible for low-wage workers and those on fixed incomes to both heat their homes and pay rent. The Massachusetts Division of Energy Resources recently estimated the average cost of heating oil in the state to be \$1.41 a gallon, a 26 percent increase over the average price last winter of \$1.12. The federal Energy Information Association estimates that if prices stay at the same level a typical heating oil customer could pay about \$500 more to heat his or her home this winter in the US.

Elderly people are being particularly hard hit. It is not unusual for older people with inadequate savings or pensions to turn down or turn off their heat during the winter to save money, putting them at risk for hypothermia and illness. The danger is compounded due to cuts in the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Only on January 24 did President Bush authorize the release of an additional \$200 million of \$300 million in emergency federal heating assistance available to the states. The funds released by Bush represent only a fraction of the \$500 million cut from heating assistance in the 2002 US budget.

“All me and my daughter can do is sit in the bedroom under blankets,” Kimberly Pinkett told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. She is one of thousands of families who have had their heat shut off this winter. Even for those eligible for federal heating assistance it often takes a month or longer from the time people apply until the time they receive help. Pinkett’s supply of heating oil ran out in mid-January. Her attempts to get assistance got the “runaround,” she explained. She is now being told it may be eight weeks before she can get help.

These conditions are the product of a decades-long assault by big business and their political representatives on jobs and social services. Over the past 25 years, hundreds of thousands of relatively well-paying manufacturing jobs have been destroyed in Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh and scores of other major US cities. For the most part they have been replaced by low-paying service jobs, some paying only minimum wage.

Virtually no new public housing is being built. The housing stock that exists in inner-city areas of former Midwest industrial centers is in a state of advanced decay, posing health and fire hazards. Instead of being replaced or renovated, older dwellings are simply left to collapse. Where older housing is being replaced or renovated, such as in central Detroit, it is to make way for upscale development.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that in no region of the United States, unless one includes Puerto Rico, is it possible for a person earning the minimum wage to afford even the most modest one-bedroom apartment. In a survey of 25 major US cities, a January 13 report issued by the US Conference of Mayors cited the lack of affordable housing as the primary cause of a 19 percent increase in requests for emergency shelter last year. The same report states that families with children comprise 39 percent of the homeless population in the surveyed cities and that 22 percent of the homeless are employed.

Despite this crisis situation, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), citing the need to correct “internal accounting errors,” is planning to cut funds to housing agencies by 30 percent in fiscal year 2003. In addition, the House appropriations bill

for fiscal year 2003 would cut \$938 million from the housing voucher program. This program provides low-income families with vouchers to defray the cost of renting private housing. The cuts would result in a net reduction of 125,000 housing vouchers below the 2002 level.

Marilyn Sullivan works at the Bethlehem Haven in Pittsburgh which serves homeless women. “There have been a lot of cuts,” she said. “Both the VA and the HUD subcommittees in the Senate have cut funding for the homeless. Six million dollars was just cut from the shelter-plus-care program. That program provides money for shelters and provides care that homeless people need.

“Another program being cut is the SHP; that is through HUD. People who are homeless have a lot of different issues and they need supportive services. If you just put a homeless person in a home, a lot of them will end up losing it. Many of them have mental health or physical health problems and they need supportive services to survive.

“The problem is that they are cutting a lot of human services and sending the money for defense.

Donna Shaw noted, “Public housing used to be an option, but now there are so many stipulations that most of our homeless can’t qualify. If you have bad credit or a criminal record then you can’t get low-income housing. Many homeless have substance abuse problems and thus have criminal or credit problems that prevent them going into public housing.

“The homeless population is getting older. We are seeing more people in the 35- to 60-year range. There are so many factors that are causing the growth—the downturn in the economy, welfare reform, the five-year time limit, and the fact that most men can’t receive welfare at all.”

Thomas spoke to the WSWS while waiting at a soup kitchen in Pittsburgh where he had come for lunch. “I have been homeless for three months,” he said. “My wife and I separated and I don’t have enough money for my own place. I have been going to shelters at night or staying with friends. It is the most miserable feeling, not having a place to go.

“A few weeks after I became homeless, I saw a woman with three kids get put out on the street. I guess she didn’t pay her rent. I felt real sorry for her, but there was nothing I could do. The kids were little, maybe 8, 9 and 10. I don’t know where she went or what she did. Every day people are being put out and there is no place for them to go.

“The budget cuts are just making things worse on the streets. A lot of people depend on programs to survive and they are not going to be there. The politicians are just for themselves, all of them. They don’t care about the homeless, the poor, the lower class of people.”



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