

Tenants of Detroit apartment building living without utilities

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Nearly 100 tenants at the Casamira Apartments in Detroit have been without electricity since Thursday, after their landlord refused to repair the electrical system after a power failure. An electrical transformer outside the building failed on Thursday, damaging the internal wiring of the building along with it.

Tenants were forced to heat their homes with their ovens and to preserve food by hanging it outside their windows in plastic bags. They had no heat, no hot water, and the hallways were pitch dark.

The situation arises just weeks after a tragic fire on Dexter Avenue on the city's near east side claimed the lives of three people—including two disabled workers—living without utilities after DTE Energy cut them off for non-payment. The fire, which was likely caused by a space heater or electrical failure, highlighted the fact that hundreds of thousands of people in economically depressed southeast Michigan are living without power.

On Wednesday afternoon, the Detroit fire marshal condemned the apartment building as a safety hazard, and ordered the residents to evacuate. They were bussed to a nearby hotel and told they would not be able to return until the landlord resolved the building's electrical issues.

DTE Energy, the building's electricity provider, quickly repaired its equipment after the failure, but said that the landlord, Ressco of Southfield, Michigan, would need to make repairs to the building's own electricity system. Tenants said they were in total darkness since the failure, but that partial power had been restored using a generator provided by the DTE.

The generators provided by DTE only powered some of the hallway lights, however. "Our apartments are still dark. And the elevators don't work," said one of the tenants. One end of a hallway lit by the electrical generator was so dark that it was impossible to see to the end.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* arrived at the building on Wednesday morning, prior to the announcement that the building had been condemned. A fire marshal patrol car was stationed out front and maintenance personnel were waiting for an electrician to arrive. The building manager said he was unavailable to comment.

"The landlord dropped the ball on this," said John Hancock, who does maintenance for the building, but is also a tenant. "They should have fixed the problem on Thursday. But there's so much that needs to be done on this building; the fire marshal was here and he found all sorts of problems."

Patricia Samuels, 50, was one of several retired people living in the building. "It's almost been a week and we have a lot of people with health problems here. I had back surgery twice and my fiancé had two strokes. It is dangerous in here and nobody would do anything for us."

James Pickens, Patricia's fiancé, said, "It's been pitch dark in these hallways. It was dangerous; I don't want to get hurt, or see Patricia get hurt."

James said people were forced to turn on gas ovens for heat and light candles to see even though the fire department told them not to. "I know that it is dangerous to leave a light on the stove when you are not cooking but you do what you've got to do." James continued, "We had no heat. We're lucky it wasn't so

bad last week or we would have been in real trouble.”

The fire marshal had earlier threatened to condemn the building unless power was restored. “They were threatening to padlock the doors if the owners had not fixed things,” said Patricia. “It would have meant that people would have to pack up and be out by 6 p.m. Can you imagine that? Where would they go? Even if you move in with family how would you live? This is all going to cost extra out of our pockets. We can’t just up and move like that. Both of us are on fixed incomes on Social Security.”

James relies on a cane to walk after he had a stroke. “He can’t hold himself steady,” added Patricia. If he doesn’t have any light he could hurt himself.” One tenant on the first floor requires an oxygen mask and had to have a personal generator brought to her. Patricia said she has arthritis, which made the cold feel even worse. “Some days it is so cold you just don’t want to come down.”

William Jones, one of the maintenance workers, said he knew the three people who died in a house fire earlier this month in Detroit because their electricity was cut off. “We were real close,” he said. (See “Three die in Detroit fire”).

“You know, this was not because we had not paid our bills,” said James. “I’ve got a copy of my payment it’s in my pocket. We paid our rent and utilities. It’s the building owner’s fault. DTE said they had fixed what they could fix on the outside of the building. It was the responsibility of the owners to fix the wires on the inside.

“You know how these companies are. They only want the money and allow things that are small at first to get worse. And this company owns lots of property.”

“Nothing happened until we all got together and decided to fight this. We called the news, the fire marshal, everybody we could,” said John. “We were all just sitting in the cold because the landlord wouldn’t do anything.”

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