

East Coast blizzard lays bare social crisis of US cities

Kate Randall, Andre Damon
11 February 2010

For the second time in less than a week, heavy snow pummeled much of the US East Coast Wednesday, keeping many people home from schools and jobs and creating treacherous driving conditions.

Major cities affected included Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., where 230,000 federal government workers were told to stay home for a third day. In New York City, public schools were shut down and the United Nations was closed.

Blizzard warnings stretched from New York to the Carolinas, with air travel grinding to a halt at airports up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Snow removal teams struggled to keep up, with snow falling at a rate of 2 inches an hour in some areas.

This winter now has the most snow on record for a number of cities and airports, shattering previous records set in the winter of 1995-1996. Baltimore broke its record of 62.5 inches of snow in a season, with a new total of 64.4 inches. Washington's Dulles International Airport eclipsed its record of 61.9 inches, recording a 65.7-inch total snowfall for the winter so far.

Tens of thousands of households were affected by power outages throughout the region, as high winds and falling tree limbs downed power lines. As of Wednesday morning, there were about 10,000 customers without power in the Washington, D.C., area, and additional homes were expected to lose electricity as the storm intensified.

In the Baltimore area, power outages had increased to about 15,000 by mid-morning Wednesday, with about 9,000 of these in Harford County. In the D.C. area, about 3,000 of the homes that had lost heat and electricity during last week's storm still remained without power Wednesday morning. As the new blizzard hit, utility companies began to receive a new wave of outage reports.

The natural fury of the storm was indeed formidable. But local authorities' response to the weather event has exposed the budget crises confronting cities, as well as local governments' woeful lack of preparedness in attending to the basic social needs of their residents. The cost of snow removal alone was poised to bust the budgets of state and local authorities, and little assistance is expected to come from the federal government to alleviate the burden.

In the nation's capital, DC officials said they had already exceeded their \$6.2 million snow removal budget, even before the latest storm. The state of Maryland had already spent \$50 million of the \$60 million budgeted to clear the roads of snow. West Virginia had spent \$39 million of its \$54 million snow and ice removal budget when the storm hit.

In Philadelphia, the snowstorm has compounded a budget crisis already at the breaking point. A storm in late December had forced Democratic Mayor Mike Nutter to come up with \$3.4 million for employee overtime, salt and payments to contractors.

Before that storm hit, the city had already faced a \$31 million budget gap. City budget director Steve Agostini said the snow removal this time around would significantly add to this deficit, and that the gap for next year would likely be "above \$100 million."

Contracts for three of the four unions representing Philadelphia city workers have expired. The amount of financial assistance from the Pennsylvania state government is also in question, and the level of funds from the federal government has been cut. Paying for the latest round of snow removal will undoubtedly mean cuts somewhere else in the city budget.

In Washington, D.C., the shutdown of federal agencies is estimated to cost \$100 million a day in lost productivity and related costs, according to the Office of Personnel Management. Agencies from the Federal Communications Commission to the Federal Trade Commission canceled hearings and other business.

The House of Representatives canceled the rest of its workweek. Several hearings were postponed, including one on the Toyota recalls scheduled for Wednesday. President Obama had moved up a bipartisan meeting with congressional leaders to Tuesday to avoid the storm.

But while the virtual government shutdown received attention in the media, little notice was taken of the impact of the storm on the poor and homeless in the capital, where the gap between rich and poor is one of the nation's greatest. By conservative estimates, there are some 6,000 homeless men, women and children on D.C. streets, some living only a stone's throw from Capitol Hill and the White House.

Last October, Mayor Adrian Fenty, a Democrat, announced a \$20 million cut to the city's homeless services budget for fiscal 2010, including \$11 million in local funding and \$9 million in federal funds. Just the week before, the House of Ruth, the largest non-profit organization in the District serving victims of domestic violence, lost nearly \$500,000 in city funding.

Advocates for the homeless predicted that the \$20 million cut threatened to put 100 families in temporary and transitional shelters at risk of being removed. Shelter providers would be forced to reduce the number of people served. In particular, upwards of 480 women, half of them housed by Catholic Charities, would face eviction.

The waiting list for shelter beds has risen as a result. Last July, at least 285 families in D.C. were on the waiting list for homeless shelters, and that number has continually increased under the impact of the deepening economic crisis.

The recent spate of storms has sharply increased the need for both food and shelter for the city's homeless population. Local charities and non-profits have struggled to meet this need with virtually no assistance from the local or federal authorities.

In the course the snowstorms, DC Central Kitchen, an organization that provides meals to shelters and culinary training to the unemployed, has provided a total of more than 30,000 breakfasts, lunches and dinners to shelter residents and the homeless and expected the need to rise with the latest storm.

Al Jazeera English carried one of the few reports on the plight of D.C.'s homeless during the last weekend's blizzard. A video posted on YouTube showed one woman who had sat on a bench in a downtown park, bundled up under blankets and a tarp, throughout the course of last weekend's blizzard.

Abdul Rahim, a homeless man, tells reporters, "Look at where we're living at. We're maybe five or ten minutes from the White House and people are sleeping on the streets, and that's sad."

The extremely harsh winter conditions in many states across the US have brought more clearly into focus the vast social divide in America. Even without the added burden of snow and cold, families in working class communities are struggling to obtain the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter and utilities.

According to figures gathered by NBC New York, since the onset of the recession, New York City has seen a drastic increase in homelessness, with about 39,000 people seeking cover in municipal shelters every night, about 40 percent of them children.

Before the latest blizzard hit the East Coast, the storm battered the Midwest, including cities like Chicago and Detroit, dropping up to a foot of snow. Although not as severely hit by the storm, any jolt to the infrastructure in this region—reeling from the impact of unemployment under conditions of the collapse of manufacturing—exacerbates the social crisis—particularly among the most vulnerable segments of the

population.

Nationally, it is estimated that up to 1.5 million teens and young adults are homeless. In all likelihood, there are tens of thousands of such young people in Detroit, which has an official unemployment rate of 30 percent, and a real jobless rate closer to one-half.

The WSWS spoke with Deborah Matthews of the Children's Center of Wayne County in Detroit, a mental health and therapeutic agency that has offered foster care, adoption and other services for 80 years and serves more than 5,000 children on an annual basis.

"The snowstorm just adds to what is existing for families because of economic conditions," Matthews said. "Families have lost their jobs, their homes, their heat is turned off and they don't have enough to eat. Those are the kinds of families we see every day.

"What happens to the children is that they come to our doors because they're dealing with these very adult situations and the effects of what adults are dealing with. When taking on these adult issues, the children become oppositional, some even suicidal.

"Not having enough food and clothing in itself makes a child insecure. They don't know what will happen to their family. They don't know how to deal with it.

"Conditions for children in Detroit are very stressful. We're suffering a lot more than other parts of the country, because of the number of people being laid off from the auto industry. They don't have the dollars to go to their own private doctors and psychologists.

"Children need a sense of security. When they come to school, class sizes are so large and they don't have teachers, don't have counselors, no gym and music. It's a tough way for kids to get educated. It's had a big effect on their overall well-being.

"With this storm, families will be stuck in the house for a few days. The point at which snow is really heavy they're stuck in homes where they don't have adequate food, or adequate heat."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact