

Pittsburgh officials shift blame for steelworker's death to paramedics

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Allegheny County officials have blamed paramedics and other emergency personnel for the death of 50-year-old Curtis Mitchell, the unemployed steelworker who passed away 30 hours after he first requested an ambulance during the worst winter storm to hit Pittsburgh in over 125 years.

Mitchell died in his home in Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood of complications related to pancreatitis more than 30 hours after he and his wife, Sharon Edge, made the first of repeated calls to emergency 911 requesting an ambulance. With medical treatment, he would have lived.

On February 6 at 2:09 a.m., Mitchell called 911 to report that he was having severe abdominal pain. The call was graded E2, as his symptoms were deemed non-life threatening. By this time the city was under more than a foot of snow, and 911 was getting more than twice as many calls as usual. Calls that weren't considered life threatening were being put on hold in a queue.

Mitchell, who had a history of pancreatic troubles, called 911 again about two hours later and was told the paramedics were on their way, but they were stuck in the snow and could not reach him. Mitchell lived on a narrow street cut off from the main roads by a set of railroad tracks. Paramedics were unable to drive up the overpass. An operator told Mitchell that he would have to walk to the ambulance. Because he could not do so, the call was cancelled at 3:57 a.m.

Mitchell called back an hour later at 4:53 a.m., and again asked to be taken to the hospital. Again a dispatched ambulance could not clear the railroad

overpass, about a quarter mile away, and the call was once again canceled because Mitchell could not walk.

At 11:18 a.m. Mitchell placed a third call for an ambulance. Hours passed with no response. By 8:15 Saturday evening, Edge called to say that her husband was having trouble breathing. The call was then upgraded to a serious emergency, or E1. An hour later Edge called again to say she could not rouse Mitchell. Paramedics, who had come near the house, again told emergency dispatchers that they could not reach Mitchell without snow removal and lighting, electricity to the neighborhood having been knocked out by the storm. The call was canceled at 9:30 p.m.

At 7:56 the next morning, Edge made her final call to 911, reporting that her husband was cold and no longer breathing. Mitchell was declared dead when paramedics finally arrived at 8:51 a.m., almost 31 hours after he had first called for assistance.

There were in all 10 phone calls from the family at 5161 Chaplain Way, four requests for paramedics, and four separately dispatched teams of paramedics.

After the story of Mitchell's needless death was picked up by national media—and amidst mounting anger over class inequities in the distribution of health care—local officials have moved to pin blame on paramedics and emergency personnel. Though weather conditions and miscommunication played their role, there was an undeniable element of indifference to Mitchell's plight.

Though there can be little doubt that Mitchell's residence was unreachable by ambulance, it is not clear

why paramedics decided not to walk the short distance to reach Mitchell, rather than asking the gravely sick man to walk to them. Meanwhile, an outdated computer database system prevented 911 personnel from realizing that Mitchell had made repeated requests for emergency assistance. Instead, each call was treated, evidently, as a new case, with Mitchell's complaints of abdominal pain classified, again and again, as a non-life threatening emergency.

Public Safety Director Michael Huss said that the paramedics should have walked to Mitchell's home to retrieve him. "It's that simple," he said. Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl said he is reviewing whether there will be any disciplinary action taken against the ambulance crew.

But the focus on the response of the emergency personnel obscures both city officials' culpability for creating the conditions that led to Mitchell's death and the deeper social crisis of which it is ultimately a tragic expression.

"Someone should be held responsible. The paramedics or the city. Someone has to be held responsible," said Edge, Mitchell's widow.

Over the past decades, the financialization of US capitalism has devastated cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit, St. Louis, and many others. The working class has been impoverished, and large parts of the population and vast neighborhoods, even whole cities, have seen their access to basic necessities drastically reduced.

It is well known that one's chances for surviving a health emergency in the US depend heavily upon where one lives. Those living in impoverished areas are treated as an almost intolerable burden—a health care "cost" to be "reined in" as President Obama puts it—or worse, as criminals undeserving of access to the most basic human necessities.

Whether or not Pittsburgh city officials openly declare it, Curtis Mitchell and those like him don't count for much in their calculations.

The havoc caused by the snowstorm itself reveals the

priorities of US society. Pittsburgh, which was once the center of the world's largest steel industry, has been devastated by decades of "de-industrialization." Politicians, who stood by as the mills closed, have responded to the resulting social crisis through cutbacks to spending.

Among the areas starved of funding is snow removal. Pittsburgh's fleet of aging snowplows and newer "light duty" pickups proved woefully inadequate for the storm. The city has available fewer than 300 workers to deal with snowstorms, down from 450 during the 1993 storm. These workers put in 12-hour shifts, keeping removal trucks on the road 24 hours a day.

"All my guys were called out (for overtime)," Joe Rossi, Jr., president of Teamsters Local Union 249 told the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, "The problem that I have is that we're very much understaffed."

Rossi said he filed a grievance with the city months ago asking officials to hire 24 additional truck operators. "Understaffing combined with antiquated equipment that the cash-strapped city can't afford to upgrade makes it difficult to clear the snow," he said. "You get what you pay for. If we never have a snowstorm, you don't need all those drivers."

Under these conditions, crews of paramedics found it difficult to operate, losing many hours extracting stuck ambulances and avoiding unplowed roads—such as the street in Hazelwood where Mitchell lived.

While city officials have cut funding for such necessary functions as snow removal, they have in recent years found hundreds of millions for spending on three new sports stadiums, a convention center, a casino, and a transit tunnel that will transport visitors back and forth from downtown hotels to the casino and stadiums.



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