

Pittsburgh: WSWS speaks to family of steelworker left to die

“If you don’t have money, they don’t care about you”

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Curtis Mitchell died February 7 in his home more than 30 hours after both he and his wife, Sharon Edge, made the first of repeated calls to emergency 911 requesting an ambulance be sent to their home in the Hazelwood section of the city of Pittsburgh.

Two feet of snow hindered paramedics from reaching the home. Mr. Mitchell lived on a narrow street in a section of Hazelwood cut off from the main roads by a set of railroad tracks. The city failed to clear the street and no special attempts were made to reach the family despite their repeated calls for help.

Hazelwood is located in the city of Pittsburgh with the Monongahela River bordering its south and west. It was home to the city of Pittsburgh’s last operating steel mill, the Hazelwood Coke Works, which was owned by Jones & Laughlin and later, its parent company, LTV, when it closed in 1998.

In 1960, the neighborhood enjoyed a population of 12,371. By 2000, the population had dwindled to 5,334. The average estimated value of townhouses or other attached units in the Hazelwood section of Pittsburgh, such as the one lived in by Curtis Mitchell and Sharon Edge, was \$28,342. The city average is \$62,259.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Sharon Edge, widow of Curtis Mitchell, and her son James Littlejohn.

“I’m hanging in there,” Sharon said. “I miss him a lot. I’m taking this one day at a time. I am feeling bad, angry and hurt that he was in so much pain and that I couldn’t do anything about it, except watch him die.

“He was my best friend. We did everything together. He shouldn’t have died so young. If he could have gotten to the hospital, he would still be with us today. I haven’t grieved the way I need to because I haven’t fully accepted his death.

“I am angry about how this was handled. He was young, and he should still be with us today. We didn’t have any electricity or heat, no sort of power of any kind. We told 911 that he was in pain and they should have gotten someone here. We shouldn’t have had to wait 31 hours for help to come.

“It was hard watching him die. All I could do was hold him and cry. All I could do was to stick with him, and that’s what I did. They wanted us to walk to them, but he was in too much pain, why couldn’t they walk to us?

“The city has apologized, but they are not talking to me. They have to make changes to the EMS, the call center, the response to the snowstorm and getting power on. All of that. Change his or her rules so that something like this does not happen again to anyone.

“They said that they didn’t realize it was an emergency, but when you get so many calls from the same person—that is an emergency. You should be able to get somebody there.

“On Saturday, a fire truck came through and plowed the road just down the block, you mean they couldn’t have turned the corner and plowed to my house so that we could have gotten Curtis to the hospital?

“The paramedics were stuck, they were down the road. I could see their lights. We didn’t have power, and they couldn’t see us. They wanted us to walk. But he couldn’t walk. He was in too much pain.

“He had been in the hospital for pancreatitis before this happened. He had been in for a week and a half. I think they let him out too early. I was there with him every day. They said that they were going to give him surgery, but then the next day they sent him home. He was fine for the first few days but then he got sick

again. He called and said that he needed to be taken to the hospital to have his surgery.

“He was a good man. He had worked in the mill for a few years before it closed down. He was doing demolition work, and he worked in the recycling plant here. Curtis lived in Hazelwood most of his life. His mother lived here, and he took care of her. When we first met, I would come down to Hazelwood to see him and then we moved into this house four or five years ago. He was a good man; he shouldn’t have been left to die.

“After I called and said he was gone, the police and the fire department came at about the same time. The coroner pronounced him dead at 8:37, and they carried the body away.”

Sharon’s son James Littlejohn added, “I miss him. He was a good person. He loved my mom. He took good care of her.

“If I was here, I think he would still be alive. I would have walked to the ambulance and told them what was going on. What the situation was—that Curtis was too weak and in too much pain to walk out through the cold and snow to them. That is why you call an ambulance when you need someone to come get you, not when you go to him or her.

“We live down in the slums. We are the poor, and they are not concerned about the poor down here. If this was Fox Chapel, they would have gotten to that person. They didn’t want to come because we are poor. The police are always harassing us. One time, I walked right out of this door here and they stopped me and searched me for no reason, said that I looked like someone they were looking for. How could they be looking for me when I just came out of my momma’s house?

“Had we been rich, they would have come; they wouldn’t have left him to just die.

“After calling and saying that he was having shortness of breath, they want him to walk to them. But that makes no sense to walk to them when he is short of breath. Had we lived in a better neighborhood, they would have gotten out of the truck and walked. If you don’t have money, they don’t care about you.

“You don’t get anything when you don’t have money. I feel for the families in Detroit. I know how that is. We’ve been there before.” Referring to utility shutoffs, James said, “You do what you have to.”

“I work with a neighbor who is a real estate agent cleaning out homes. That’s another thing. You wouldn’t have the crime and poverty in an area like this if people had jobs. There’s nowhere to work around here, and the kids only have a small YMCA where there is a food pantry and they have some after-school and summer programs, and our library is closing. That’s not enough.”



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