

Former legislator Juanita Goggins freezes to death in South Carolina home

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The body of 75-year-old Juanita Goggins, who in 1974 became the first black woman elected to the state government of South Carolina, was found in her home on March 3. Goggins, who is believed to have been suffering from Alzheimer's or another form of dementia, had been living with no heat or running water and is believed to have frozen to death on or around February 20.

While Goggins does not appear to have been without money, her utility bills went unpaid and, in the middle of an especially harsh cold snap in which temperatures dropped below freezing, her electricity was cut off by her utility company. She died alone, wearing several layers of clothing in an effort to keep warm. At least 11 days passed before her body was discovered.

Along with having been the first black woman elected to the South Carolina general assembly, Goggins, a lifelong liberal Democrat, was also the first black woman to serve on the US Civil Rights Commission. Goggins is well remembered in South Carolina for her focus on education and health care during her time as a legislator. She fought to reduce the student-teacher ratios of overcrowded classrooms and led the way in establishing funding for sickle-cell anemia testing in the state. Prior to her time as a legislator, Goggins had been a home economics teacher in South Carolina's segregated school system.

She retired from the state legislature in 1978 for health reasons that remain somewhat vague. Sometime in the early 1990s, she divorced and moved to a small home in Columbia, the state capital, just miles from the statehouse building in which she had served. She lived there for the remainder of her life.

Suggesting she was suffering from a considerable mental illness, Goggins lived an increasingly reclusive

lifestyle, rarely leaving her home and almost never allowing anyone to enter. Her occasional walks through the neighborhood stopped after she was mugged in 2009, the same year the state government renamed a stretch of highway in her honor.

Linda Marshall, who managed Goggins' property, told the press that "[Goggins] needed someone to assist her, but anyone who tried to get close, she'd block them off. She was very fragile. This was something I always dreaded."

The death of Juanita Goggins reveals a number of things about life in the US. Above all, her death is a direct result of the lack of sufficient health care for the elderly and the subordination of basic human necessities such as light, heat and water to the profit interests of private companies.

Care for the elderly is considered a matter of individual responsibility in the US, with working class families already shouldered with enormous burdens expected to take on the full-time care of their loved ones. Those without families to help them are left to their own devices. The death of an elderly person such as Juanita Goggins, left alone in her home and exposed to the elements, is not, tragically, an isolated incident but an all too common occurrence in the United States.

The shutting off of utilities to those who can no longer afford them during the middle of winter is also a regular occurrence in the US and has led to numerous deaths from exposure to sub-zero temperatures or deadly house fires such as those that have occurred in Detroit, Michigan, this year. Workers attempting to survive without basic utilities by heating their homes with space heaters or using candles for light often pay with their lives.

The burden thrust onto the working class by the economic crisis has only made access to utilities and

the fulfillment of the most basic needs all the more impossible for millions of people. In 2009, more than 8.2 million households in the US required financial assistance for utilities through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. One in eight Americans currently requires emergency food assistance because they are unable to get enough to eat. Millions report having to decide between paying for food, medications or utilities.

As the living standards of the working class are coming more and more under attack, the lives of the most vulnerable members of society, including children, the elderly, and the mentally ill are placed in enormous danger.



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