

The deadly consequences of utility shutoffs

Andrea Peters
16 March 2010

Since the start of this year, at least eight people in Detroit have died in fires that occurred in houses where the heat and electricity had been shut off by DTE Energy, the local utility provider. The residents of these homes were too poor to pay for these services. They were forced to turn to unsafe methods in order to try to stay warm as temperatures dropped, and they paid for this with their lives.

There is a clear link between utility shutoffs and house fires, particularly in the wintertime. It is driven by the fact that people resort to electric and kerosene space heaters once they have lost the use of their central heating systems, or turn to candles for illumination when their electricity has been disconnected.

It is a well-established fact that using space heaters increases the risk of fire death. According to a report by the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) released earlier this year, in the period from 2003 to 2007, nationwide 72 percent of home heating fire deaths and 62 percent of home heating injuries “involved stationary or portable space heaters.”

The risk of death posed by using space heaters is 18 to 25 times higher than that associated with central heating systems. Additionally, those heaters that rely on gas, the report notes, “pose a higher risk of death due to non-fire carbon monoxide poisoning.”

As might be expected, incidences of home heating fires increase significantly during cold months, with 49 percent of all such events having occurred between December and February during the years 2003 to 2007.

In the South, where both fire-death rates and poverty are the highest, there is a greater use of space heaters. This is due to a combination of “affordability” problems and a lack of central heating systems in many homes.

The relationship between the use of space heaters and financial hardship is also well known. For example, the NFPA notes that people rely on kerosene-fueled space heaters because of “the opportunity for savings from compartmentalized heating, i.e., savings from heating only the spaces that are in use.”

David Fox of the National Low-Income Energy Consortium (NLIEC) underscored these points in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“Regardless of whether it’s shut off or simply that bills are so high that people voluntarily limit usage, several things happen,” Fox noted. “People use space heaters, kerosene heaters, that increase risk of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning. And people limit use of electricity. They light the home with candles, which are often too close to something combustible.”

The consequences of energy poverty

In 2001, the National Fuel Funds Network (NFFN) published a study entitled “In Harm’s Way: Home Heating, Fire Hazards and Low-Income Households,” which directly draws out the link between utility shutoffs and increased fire dangers.

“In addition to facing the health impact of cold homes, households that are placed in jeopardy of losing their home heating service, or who actually experience the termination of service, face the safety problems associated with a resort to unsafe alternative methods for heating as well.”

Observing that there has been “a new move to auxiliary heating sources, attributable to high natural gas prices, substantial arrears, and a high rate of utility service terminations,” there “opens up the possibility of an associated new fire risk for low-income households.”

After pointing out the “significant association” between poverty and higher residential fire death rates, the NFFN outlines the further fire risks associated with being poor, including “not being able to afford smoke detectors,” “not being able to afford a telephone” and “living in less fire resistant housing.”

A study prepared by the NLIEC in 2004 about the consequences of “energy poverty” in the state of Missouri, provides some statistical details about the link between utility shutoffs and unsafe heating methods.

“A high percentage of households reporting the use of their kitchen oven for space heating have experienced the disconnection or discontinuation of service for nonpayment,” it states. Nearly 60 percent of who used their oven to stay warm had their service shut off either “often” or “sometimes.”

“The safety burdens,” the study points out, “fall primarily on the lowest income households in Missouri. While 50 percent of households with incomes between 101 percent and 150 percent of the poverty level never used their kitchen oven for space heating, only 40 percent of the households below 50 percent of the poverty level could report that.”

The fire dangers posed by utility shutoffs extend beyond simply the question of heating. Using data drawn from 1997-98, a study released by the NFPA in 2007 reports that 24 percent of fatal candle fires occurred in homes where the power had been shut off for reasons other than a short-term outage. Furthermore, the study notes that “most of the catastrophic (multiple fire death) candle fires...involve candles used for light due to lack of power, due to either a temporary situation or a termination of service.”

As an example, the study notes that in 2006 five people perished in a house fire in Ohio sparked by using a candle for light after their power was shut off. Using flashlights, the NFPA notes, is not a realistic alternative for impoverished people, as those “who cannot afford to pay their electric bills may also have difficulty affording flashlights and batteries.”

Sharon Gamache, the director of High-Risk Outreach at the NFPA,

told the WWS, “I would say that any time that you have conditions in which people have more fuel and central heating, they are less likely to use other unsafe methods. In that sense, there’s a logical relationship between access to utilities and fire safety.”

The health consequences of living without adequate heat and electricity

Both DTE Energy and the Michigan Public Service Commission—the governor-appointed agency that is responsible for regulating the energy monopoly—know that as soon as utilities are cut to a household, the circumstances are created in which the risk of a deadly house fire increases. This link is purposefully ignored. Furthermore, the utility company and the government are aware of the long-term negative health consequences for people of living without adequate heat and electricity, which are also well established.

Jerry McKim, the director of Iowa’s Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), recently described the effects of “unaffordable energy” as “dire.”

“In an effort to better afford their utility bills, many elderly households cut back on prescribed medicine and/or set their thermostats too low risking their already insecure health and families with young children sacrifice their children’s nutritional needs. Disconnected households use unsafe methods of heating that increase the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, and those who live by candlelight increase the likelihood of a house fire tragedy,” McKim is quoted as stating in a February 22 press release from the National Energy Assistance Directors’ Association (NEADA).

He added, “This is more than an energy issue and needs to be acknowledged for what it is: a serious public health matter.”

McKim’s comments are substantiated by a joint report produced by the NFFN, NLIEC, and NEADA entitled, “The Cold Facts.” It notes that the effect of high energy bills on low-income households are “homelessness,” “malnutrition,” “heart disease,” “heat stroke” and the “the disintegration of families.”

The Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program reports in a 2007 study that babies and toddlers who live in energy insecure households disproportionately suffer from poor health, a history of hospitalizations, increased risk of developmental problems, and food insecurity. Furthermore, the inadequacy of aid for low-income households from government programs increases health risks. Children in those families that are LIHEAP-eligible but are not receiving assistance are “significantly more likely to be underweight.”

There are currently record numbers of people in the state of Michigan, and throughout the country as a whole, seeking assistance from LIHEAP. Applications to the Michigan LIHEAP are up 38 percent for fiscal year 2010, the third highest increase among all states, following behind Mississippi (68 percent) and Washington (42 percent). This jump, which represents requests from an additional 240,799 households, is a sign of a pervasive state of “energy insecurity,” which has reached epidemic proportions.

Under these conditions, the policy of shutting off people’s utilities for non-payment and keeping utility rates excessively high is creating a serious health crisis in the United States.

The response of DTE and the government

In order to absolve themselves of their responsibility for depriving people of light and warmth, DTE, with the aid of the media, maligns victims of shutoffs as “energy thieves.” It claims that it must sever unauthorized hookups to outside power lines for health and safety reasons. This is a red herring. The energy giant is unconcerned about the consequences to people’s health and safety when they fail to properly restore gas and electricity to a home.

For its part, the government echoes DTE’s claims that “many options” are available to those who would seek out assistance. In so doing, they give support to the utility company’s insistence that those who fail to receive such aid and resort to other methods to get electricity are “stealing.” The government is far more concerned about protecting the profit interests of DTE than the health and safety of the working population.

The implication that there is enough aid to help people facing the possible shutoff of their utilities is also false and it has been for decades.

David Fox of the NLIEC told the *World Socialist Web Site* in an interview, “No, the resources are not adequate and yes there should be more.

“In 1982, which is the first year that LIHEAP became a national program, Congress gave it \$1.85 billion. As recently as five years ago, it was funded at \$1.875 billion. Just in order to keep up with inflation, the number would have had to be \$4 billion.

“Two to three years ago when we saw a spike in energy costs, more money was directed to LIHEAP, an additional \$1.5 billion. But even then it was only serving about 15 percent of all households eligible for the program. Then Congress raised funding for LIHEAP to \$5.5 billion, the maximum allowed by federal law. That allowed us to reach 9.9 million households, the largest number ever. But this was still less than 20 percent of eligible households. That tells me that it doesn’t take a mathematician to say that even at its highest level, we are grossly underfunded.”

Moreover, as Fox noted, LIHEAP is on track to see its funding further reduced. “I’m getting dangerously close to lobbying, which I’m not supposed to do. But let me put it this way. The Obama administration has proposed that \$3.6 billion be allocated in the coming year. That’s a step in the wrong direction if that happens, even just from the perspective of the numbers.”



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact