

Spate of cold-related deaths in Chicago

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As extreme winter weather sweeps over the Midwest, the Chicago area has witnessed a series of tragic deaths from cold exposure and unsafe home-heating methods. The entirely preventable character of these accidents underscores the deteriorating social conditions of the working population.

On Saturday, Leroy Charles of South Chicago died from carbon monoxide poisoning in his home. Charles was 45 years old and leaves a family behind. According to the fire department, carbon monoxide fumes in his home were at 60 times the normal level. Few other details surrounding his death have been reported. However, representatives from utility giant People's Gas have confirmed that the company had turned off the gas supply to the home, and that it was subsequently turned back on incorrectly.

Charles's death comes on the heels of two similar cases in late November. Chicago resident Edward Henderson, age 52, was found dead from carbon monoxide poisoning on Wednesday, November 24 in a Southside apartment at 6608 South Bishop. Two other men were taken to the hospital with injuries.

Just five days before, 42-year-old Lydia Watkins was found dead with elevated levels of carbon monoxide in her blood in the same apartment building. According to People's Gas, the supply lines to the apartment building had been disconnected after an inspection revealed the water heater and boiler were not in good working order. A spokesperson for the company reported that the appliances had been reconnected without authorization.

While an investigation is underway into these two deaths, it is all but certain that the victims will be blamed and People's Gas exonerated of any wrongdoing. People's Gas spokesperson Bonnie Johnson commented to local ABC News affiliate WLS 7, "By disconnecting these and tagging them, we felt like we were giving a clear signal that these appliances

were in need of repair."

In the past two weeks, bitterly cold weather has taken the lives of several homeless Chicago residents. On Friday, December 3, the Will County Coroner's office reported 61-year-old Thomas G. Sands of Joliet was found dead without a coat or shoes in a field near a homemade shelter he had been residing in. Temperatures that morning in Joliet dropped to a low of 19 degrees. An autopsy confirmed Sands died of cold exposure.

In announcing the death, Joliet Police Chief Fred Hayes remarked, "It's our understanding this man had been homeless for a few years, but despite experience with the cold, he did not survive."

Two days later, on Sunday, December 5, 44-year-old Robert K. Mullins, also homeless in Joliet, was found dead under snow next to a vacant grocery store. Temperatures in the area were reported as low as 12 degrees that night. An official ruling on the cause of Mullins's death will not be available for a few weeks.

On the same day, Paula Spika, age 50, was found frozen in a ditch in the southwest Chicago suburb of Palos Park. According to media sources, Spika was found lying face up in a four-foot ditch, partially frozen in ice, including her head. There were no signs of trauma reported on her body.

On Sunday, Cook County recorded its first confirmed cold death of the season after Krzystoff Pekala, age 34, of the Northwest Side, was found dead on his garage floor. Last year Chicago's Cook County recorded 12 deaths attributed to the cold.

Media reports of such deaths inevitably descend into the implicit, if not outright, blaming of the deceased. A picture is painted of individuals who either engaged in some unsafe activity—such as "illegally" tapping into the gas supply as temperatures plunge outside—or supposedly refused to seek assistance from one of the myriad organizations established for that purpose.

Such assessments are contradicted by overwhelming evidence of the social crisis—and often on the very same newspaper pages, which detail the drastic austerity measures enacted by state and city officials, mass layoffs, and rising home foreclosures. The media overlooks the real criminals in the utility companies, the banks, and government whose reckless actions in allowing shutoffs and foreclosures in severe weather will inevitably result in deaths.

Deepening budget crises in both the state and city will only exacerbate homelessness, utility shutoffs, and all the conditions that give rise to the sort of unnecessary deaths that have taken place recently.

A new statewide survey of human service organizations published by the Illinois Partners for Human Services notes that “Illinois’ children, seniors, people with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness are suffering as human service organizations cut essential programs, reduce hours, and curtail levels of service in the face of the state’s budget crisis.”

Of the nearly 300 organizations that participated in the survey, more than half report “taking actions to reduce access to vital programs and services by reducing hours or levels of service,” and 40 percent “report expanded waiting lists for services, and more than a quarter report that they have closed programs due to budget cuts.”

On Chicago’s North side, the Lakeview shelter will officially close at the end of the year, turning out 30 men, 20 of whom have no place to go. The shelter has operated out of the basement of the Lakeview Lutheran Church for 27 years, but will be discontinued so that the church may use the space for other community services.

In nearby Lake County, only one homeless shelter system exists, operated by PADS Crisis Services. Since the start of its season on October 1, the organization has seen a doubling of its patrons to nearly 800. According to Executive Director Cathy Curran, “We’re overflowing with new faces—and old ones—mainly because of unemployment, foreclosure and eviction.”

With an operating budget of \$1.6 million—largely funded through private donors—the shelter is entering its 23rd season of operation. Promised state funding for the current year has not been delivered; the organization is currently awaiting an \$81,000 payment

that is more than five months late.

Conditions at these shelters are deplorable. At the Lakeview shelter that is scheduled to close, 30 men sleep together in one room and share only two bathrooms and one shower. The Lake County PADS shelters wake tenants up at 5 a.m. and turn them out at 6 a.m. During the day, adults are forbidden to even nap in the facility.

Homelessness is also widespread among children. In the northern suburb of Waukegan, a recent charity drive collected hundreds of winter clothing articles to distribute to the more than 200 homeless children who have been identified in the Waukegan School District alone. Overall, more than 10,000 children in the Chicago public school system are homeless.



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