

New York City services come to a halt after blizzard

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Basic New York City services came to a near halt on Monday and Tuesday after a severe blizzard blanketed the East Coast on Sunday night and Monday morning. Over 20 inches of snow fell amidst high winds and freezing temperatures. The blizzard was the sixth-worse in the city's history.

The city's decaying infrastructure simply froze up, bringing transportation and emergency medical services to a virtual halt. The brunt of the emergency fell on the millions of poor and working class New Yorkers who largely live in the outer boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Queens.

At least two deaths resulted directly from the collapse of emergency medical services, that of an elderly woman in Queens and a newborn baby in Brooklyn.

Nine subway lines stopped completely on Monday. Service was only partly restored on most of them late on Tuesday. By Wednesday morning, at least three lines were still not functioning. Over 300 city buses, mainly the city's new green hybrid buses, were stuck in the snow.

Commuters coming from Kennedy Airport were stranded on an A subway train for over six hours early Monday morning, with no access to bathrooms and without heat. A rescue train sent to relieve them also became stuck.

The country's largest commuter line, the Long Island Railroad, which services communities on Long Island east of New York City, shut down "until further notice" on Monday, stranding hundreds of commuters at stations.

One blogger noted that more than a full day after the storm ended, all subway lines running through the working class Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn were delayed and local bus service was not running at full capacity.

Hundreds of thousands of workers were unable to get to work on Monday, and, to a lesser degree, on Tuesday, costing families millions of dollars in lost wages.

Adding insult to injury, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority is increasing bus, subway and other commuter fares by almost 17 percent today.

Perhaps the most telling and visible signs of social decay

were the city's streets. Huge swaths of the city's 6,000 miles of road were unplowed. Cars were stranded in the middle of streets and emergency vehicles were unable to make their way into many residential areas.

Clearing of the sidewalks is left entirely to home and building owners, so that areas in front of abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and, in some cases, construction sites remain covered in snowdrifts, making passage impossible and reducing foot traffic to medieval conditions.

The city had over 1,700 plowing vehicles from the city's Sanitation Department in operation, but because of budget cuts, the department's staff levels are at their lowest level since 1998.

Streets in New York City are classified as primary, secondary and tertiary for plowing priority. Apparently, though, there is a fourth category that comes before the other three: those streets that house major businesses or especially wealthy and powerful residents. In some areas of the wealthiest borough, Manhattan, the center of the tourist industry and home to hundreds of multi-millionaires and billionaires, streets were cleared early on, sometimes within hours of the snowfall.

In Manhattan's affluent Upper East Side neighborhood, streets with the residences of billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his recent choice for schools chancellor, the wealthy businesswoman Cathleen Black, were plowed in short order.

In sharp contrast to this, even central arteries in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island were untouched 24 hours after the snowfall.

One exception in Staten Island was the street where Sanitation Commissioner John Doherty lives, which was cleared on Monday while neighboring streets went unplowed.

By Wednesday afternoon, only 45 percent of side roads had been cleared in Brooklyn. Garbage and recycling collection had not yet resumed and mail delivery was spotty.

The reaction of Bloomberg to the snow crisis showed his contempt—and that of the super-wealthy social layer he

represents—for the millions who were stranded or denied necessary services.

“The world has not come to an end,” he said at a press conference. “The city is going fine. Broadway shows were full last night. There are lots of tourists here enjoying themselves. I think the message is that the city goes on.”

This attitude has earned him the hatred of the city’s working people.

“I’m furious at Mayor Bloomberg” one livery driver reported to National Public Radio. “He’s a rich man, so he doesn’t care about the little people. I have to work, why aren’t people out there plowing? Why does the mayor always go on TV the night before to say, ‘We’re all set with a fleet of salt trucks,’ and then you never see a single truck. They always abandon Queens.”

Even worse than the lost wages and enormous inconvenience to New Yorkers was the direct danger to life and limb resulting from the city’s failure to cope with the storm.

Hospitals were short-staffed because of the transportation difficulties, and many hospital premises received no priority in plowing.

WNYC News reported that “as of Tuesday afternoon, the streets surrounding Jamaica Hospital in Queens were still not plowed, despite several calls to city officials, making it impossible for ambulances or private vehicles to approach the hospital.”

Ole Paderson, vice president of public affairs at the hospital, said, “You’d think that hospitals would be high on the list for getting plowed—but that’s not the case apparently. There’s no place to put the ambulances. Staff and doctors can’t even get in.”

Car accidents in the city during and after the storm killed at least five people. The inability of emergency responders to help is thought to have been a factor in at least some of the deaths.

Hard-to-control fires also struck areas of the city. On Sunday night, a five-alarm fire raged through the top floor of a six-story Queens apartment building, injuring three residents and four firefighters. Firefighters said they had difficulty reaching the fire because of abandoned vehicles and uncleared roads. Crews worked for more than three hours before bringing the fire under control. The blaze displaced 100 families.

The New York Fire Department (NYFD) has estimated that poor travel conditions and the need to respond to health emergencies reduced its firefighting capabilities by 40 percent.

On Monday, the city’s 911 emergency phone number fielded 49,478 calls, the sixth-highest number in its history. Over 1,300 of these calls were backlogged, meaning

responders were never informed of health emergencies.

At least two deaths have been attributed to the inability of first responders to reach those in need in time.

In Corona, Queens, 75-year-old Yvonne Freeman died because her daughter was unable to reach a 911 operator in a system that was deluged with calls on Monday night. A neighbor performed CPR, but even when 911 was finally reached, it took Emergency Medical Services 1 hour and 45 minutes to get through unplowed streets.

Liz Freeman told New York 1 News: “Mayor Bloomberg, you can’t bring my mother back. And that’s all I really want. I’ve been with her for 41 years. I miss her, she’s my life. The snow will melt, but this will never fade from my memory ever.”

In Crown Heights, Brooklyn, a baby died on Monday evening when Emergency Medical Services were unable to reach a young mother as she went into labor 10 hours after a 911 call. Few of Crown Heights’s streets had been plowed.

There were a number of other emergencies that nearly resulted in death because of the city’s inability to deliver services.

71-year-old Salvatore Pastore, a heart-attack victim, nearly died when a Fire Department ambulance became stuck on an unplowed street in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. “My husband could be dead right now,” his wife, Lucy, said. “The mayor acts like this is a minor inconvenience. It makes me sick.”

The city of 8 million is one of the wealthiest in the world, but was unable to provide for the most basic transportation and health needs of its population because of a snow emergency.

The causes of this are economic, social and political. Budget cuts in essential services, an aging and jerry-rigged transportation infrastructure, and a political establishment single-mindedly focused on protecting the interests of a tiny layer of ultra-wealthy residents lie behind the collapse in essential services. When such treatment is accorded a population that is suffering from 17 percent real unemployment and growing homelessness and poverty, a social explosion is inevitable.



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