

Detroit cuts funding for homeless warming centers

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Budget cuts carried out on the quiet have prevented emergency warming centers in Detroit from opening their doors all winter, leaving thousands of homeless and poor residents in the bitter cold. Homeless advocates were given little notice that the city had eliminated all funding to operate the single remaining warming center, Operation Get Down, on Detroit's east side.

A decade ago, Detroit operated three warming centers, funded with \$500,000. This already slim budget has been chopped away over the past few years, forcing closure and consolidation of services. At the same time, homelessness has swelled and thousands of other Detroit residents suffer without gas and electricity in the winter months. Last year, the city provided only \$182,000 to Operation Get Down. In June 2010, the homeless aid was among \$115 million cut from the city budget.

The center provided a last resort for homeless people to find respite from the cold, especially those with drug addictions, mental illness, or criminal backgrounds, who may not meet requirements imposed by some homeless shelters or religious charity operations.

On extremely cold nights, the warming center also took overflow from the shelters, rolling out mats on the floor to accommodate hundreds of people. Neighborhood Services Organization's Tumaini Center, a homeless shelter that has relied on Operation Get Down to house its nighttime overflow of residents, now has to ignore building capacity requirements.

Tumaini holds only 120 people officially, but faces overwhelming need. The Neighborhood Services Organization is the only one in the city with centers open 24 hours a day every day of the week that serves homeless people with mental illness or physical disabilities. In the winter months, accessibility becomes

a life-or-death issue for the most vulnerable.

This winter, rising need and a lack of beds has driven the Tumaini shelter to set out plastic chairs for people to sleep in. When the chairs run out, residents line up against the walls and in cold hallways, where they stand or sit all night.

"The city doesn't get it," Reggie Huff, director at Tumaini, told the *Detroit News* in an interview January 27. "It really is a city's responsibility to make sure their residents have a warm bed and place to stay."

Shenetta Coleman, director of the city's Human Service Department, disagreed in a statement this week. "It was intended to be a safety net," she said, calling city-funded warming centers "a nice extra to have." Coleman personally declined to request funding for warming centers in the 2010-2011 budget.

According to city council member Kwame Kenyatta, Operation Get Down was awarded some \$90,000 in federal Development Block Grants last fall, but the money has not been disbursed.

There are more than 100,000 homeless residents in Michigan, according to the most recent data from the state's Homeless Management Information System. In Detroit's Wayne County, where advocates are presently doing a count of the homeless population, more than 10,000 families are thought to become homeless every year.

The city currently estimates some 20,000 people live on the streets. Arriving at a precise estimate of the city's homeless population at any point in time is difficult, however, because of the degree of economic deterioration in residential and industrial areas. Unknown numbers of people sleep in abandoned houses or old factories and warehouses.

Beyond the homeless population, tens of thousands of other Detroit residents are struggling to stay warm

without gas or electricity. Energy giant Detroit Edison (DTE) has cut off service to 200,000 households in southeast Michigan in the past year, including hundreds of families a day in distressed Detroit neighborhoods. DTE counts 476,000 regional customers in arrears; no law protects these residents from shutoff in the winter.

The withholding of funding for emergency warming centers is part of a broader attack on the working class by the David Bing city administration and its counterpart at the Michigan state level. Services particularly relied upon by the poorest layers have been actively targeted for elimination.

Newly elected Michigan Governor Rick Snyder has promised further “painful cuts” totaling \$1.8 billion this year concentrated in education, public assistance, and the Earned Income Tax Credit received by low-income families.

Basic infrastructure is on the chopping block for vast areas of Detroit: half the city’s public schools are threatened with closure in the next two years, ambulance services have been downsized, and the city budget is targeting other already embattled public agencies.

Among the social services facing cuts is the Detroit Public Library system—upon which the poor substantially depend for access to information, as well as for warmth and a safe environment. In a January 18 memo to employees, quoted in *American Libraries* magazine, the library system’s director Anne Mondowney characterized funding levels as a “fiscal crisis that is unprecedented in magnitude... the library will need to drastically reduce personnel and other operating costs.”

Similarly, recreation and community centers throughout the Detroit metro area are set to cut hours and impose fees on residents who depend on their services.

Perhaps the most macabre expression of the impact of budget cuts on the poor is the backlog of “pauper burials” faced by the Wayne County medical examiner’s office, something out of Dickensian England. Budget cuts at the state and city level have reduced the office’s annual budget to a mere \$30,000. The funds allow for burials or cremations of only half the bodies that come in every year. Because of this, the office currently holds 185 corpses stacked in its morgue; some of them have been there for more than

two years.



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