

State criminalizes family victimized by DTE and poverty

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10 February 2011

In early January, the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS), with the assistance of the police, fire department and emergency medical services, used an axe to force their way into the home of Wanda Scott and her father Walter. Their purpose was to remove the 95-year-old Walter from the home, following the discovery by the agency that the family did not have heat.

Local utility DTE Energy had shut off service to the family for an overdue bill of \$8,000. The Scotts, who have electricity in the home, use a space heater in the bedroom to stay warm. However, the rest of the house is frigid, and in the past few weeks, temperatures have fallen as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit.

Wanda, 51, has been Walter's official caregiver for the last 20 years. She is now accused of neglect—a charge she strenuously denies—because she cannot afford to heat their home. The DHS refuses to grant Wanda the right to visit or speak with her father.

Instead of assisting families victimized by DTE's state-approved policy of terminating utility service for non-payment, the state of Michigan persecutes them.

"It is awful," stated Wanda to the WWS. "I have always taken good care of my father. I have been taking care of him for 20 years. But they came here in the middle of the day while both of us were resting. They didn't have to break the door down. If they had knocked, I would have let them in."

"I heard this big noise and I went down the steps to see what was going on," stated Wanda. "The first thing I saw was the police and a fireman with an axe in his hand. The man from the DHS was real nasty. They just grabbed my father, put him in a stretcher, and took him away."

Walter was taken to a hospital, where Wanda visited him often during the six days he was there. The nursing

staff would allow Wanda to stay after hours with her father, as he would call out for her at night. Following the hospital stay, Walter, who suffers from Alzheimer's, was taken to a nursing home. Wanda has not seen or spoken to him for three and a half weeks.

"This is wrong," stated the distressed daughter. "I need my father and he needs me. I want him to be back home. I don't know what they will do to him, but nursing homes are known for mistreating people. They are not going to take care of him the way I took care of him."

Wanda said the case began after a DHS social worker noticed that there was no heat on in the house. "She [Blanche Calhoun] said that this is not good for him. But she told me that she would get us some help with the bill. Calhoun told me she would get me \$666 for my father and me to stay in a hotel for 90 days until the heating problem was resolved. She didn't follow through. Instead she reported me, and now they are treating me like I am a criminal."

Wanda said this would not be an issue except for the brutal treatment of DTE. "I spoke to DTE," stated Wanda. "They said I needed \$850 to get the heat back on. DHS got me \$350, but that doesn't go to any of the \$850. I still need another \$850 before they will allow me to bring my father back." If Wanda is unable to raise this sum before February 17, DTE has said that it will progressively raise the amount it is demanding to turn the heat back on.

Wanda said that DTE had refused over the course of the years to put the family on a payment plan because Walter's income, which consists of social security and a small pension, was too high. "We could see the bill was building up, and they threatened to shut us off in 2005. But they would not accept a payment plan. They said that we had to pay up the bill."

The utility bill became ever larger over the course of the years. Then suddenly in August 2010, a DTE crew showed up at the Scott family's house with a construction tractor to remove the gas line to the home. Because of Walter's advanced age, the family qualified for DTE's Winter Protection Plan (WPP), which would have prevented the shutoff. However, the WPP only protects seniors and low-income customers from shutoff between November 1 and March 31. Thus, DTE moved to terminate service in August, so that the Scotts could not invoke the Winter Protection Plan in order to keep their heat on over the course of the cold months.

"They came here on August 30 and began digging up the yard. It took them two days to remove (the piping), so they didn't finish until September 1," stated Wanda. "It was just awful. I asked them, 'What can I do?' I didn't expect them at all. They said that the bill was too high and the company ordered the pipes removed."

The Scott family's main source of income is Walter's pension and social security payment. A retired Chrysler worker, Walter receives \$1,800 a month between the two checks. Wanda earns an additional \$400 from the state for serving as her father's caregiver. With her father having been removed from the home and his income seized by the state to pay for his nursing home care, Wanda has lost all sources of income. She is now destitute.

"The bills are piling up. I think the pipes in the kitchen have either frozen or burst because they're not working. I'm short on food. I'm afraid I'm going to be homeless," she said.

"[The state] claims that I have plenty of money, but it is not true. I just entered into an agreement with the city and county to pay back taxes that come to nearly \$6,000. We nearly lost the house. I have food and utility costs, and there is car insurance," explained Wanda.

"Where do you turn for help?" pleaded Wanda. "I have asked everyone I can think of to help with the gas bill. Everyone says they can't do anything."

The Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) is fighting to bring Wanda's case to public attention. Her situation is characteristic of the desperate conditions facing hundreds of thousands of households in Michigan, and millions across the US.

CAUS demands that DTE and its executives be held

responsible for the social misery that result from the energy giant's brutal shutoffs policies and exorbitant rates. CAUS insists that access to heat, electricity, and phone service is a social right, which should never be denied to anyone for any reason. CAUS calls for an immediate end to all utility shutoffs. It is working to mobilize working people, independently of both the Democrats and Republicans, to fight for the transformation of the utility companies into publicly owned enterprises, run in the interest of meeting social needs, not private profit.

To find out more about CAUS and how you can become involved, click here.



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