

Retired autoworker in Flint, Michigan dies after utilities are shut off

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Early Monday morning, neighbors found 86-year-old John Morgan, a retired Flint autoworker, dead in his truck parked outside in his driveway on Parkway Avenue. Morgan died a few days after the local utility company shut off his electricity for a bill of \$291.

Flint is a city where the autoworkers union made history 75 years ago in its struggle against the largest company in the world at that time, General Motors. Today, it is a ghost town, with many areas blighted, including the street Morgan lived on, because of the massive job cuts carried out by the automaker in the 1980s and 1990s.

Officials say they are awaiting autopsy reports to determine the exact cause of death, as Morgan had various health problems. However, there was immediate widespread anger that another elderly worker has died because he was trying to stay warm.

According to some of those who knew him, Morgan used his home electricity to charge his car battery. When the electricity was cut off, he apparently lost both heat for his home and for his vehicle.

John Morgan's next-door neighbor and friend, Adie Powell, 85, said he was called on the phone by another neighbor, Mark Williams, who found John slumped outside in the front seat of his idled truck.

"Mark called me around 9 in the morning to say that John was in his truck and not moving," Powell said. "He said the window was down and that John was laying still."

"I told Mark to call 911. He was laying some kind of way down in the truck with his feet out. I told him, just call 911 and they will send an ambulance for him."

According to media reports, the police, who arrived with the ambulance to collect Morgan's body, found a shutoff notice on the door for an overdue electricity bill. A Consumers Energy representative justified the

company's action, claiming that they knocked on the door but did not get an answer, and that they did not know that he was elderly.

In 2009 a 93-year-old Bay City, Michigan worker, Marvin Shur, froze to death after a limiter for electricity was placed on his meter. A state law was passed to prevent the elderly from having their utilities shut off in the winter. However, if you have any previous problems the utility company can still shut you off.

On the weekend that Morgan died the weather was especially cold in Flint. On Sunday the temperatures hovered in the mid-20s. By early Monday morning, the temperature had dropped as low as 16 degrees Fahrenheit.

Consumers Energy, owned by CMS Energy, is earning the highest profits in its history while it carries out record shutoffs of its customers. CMS reported profits of \$324 million in 2010, the same year that it shut off gas and electricity for 148,000 households. In 2011, its profits were even higher—\$374 million in the first three quarters of the year, as it shut off power for 164,634 households.

Aaron Flood, who was Morgan's mechanic and had a mechanic's shop down the block, was greatly upset with the death of his friend.

"I tried to help John," he said. The mechanic said the problem with his car was that the door would not shut. Since it would not close, the light stayed on inside, draining the battery.

"He used a battery charger to keep the car running," Flood said. "But once the electricity is turned off then there is not a source to keep the battery charged."

Flood believes John was trying to get the car started but got stuck in the car. "I heard that his foot was stuck out of the window. I suspect he was trying to get the car to start. I think he just froze to death. There is no heat

in the house. I think he was trying to start the truck and just froze.”

Both Flood and Powell said an electric fan circulates heat in the homes in the area. “I know that if they turn off the electricity to the house, well, that’s it. There is no heat to the house,” Flood said. Powell said his house is similar to Morgan’s. “If the electricity is off, that means there is no fan, so it would be cold. I had an old furnace that used gravity for the heat but the new ones need a fan.”

“John was a real good neighbor,” Powell said. “We would talk all the time, especially when he was outside in the back or in the garage fixing something.”

Both Powell and Morgan retired from General Motors. Morgan worked at the Chevrolet plant and Powell at Buick. Powell was stunned to hear that Morgan’s utilities had been shut off for a bill of \$291. “I don’t understand that,” he said. “That’s so little. It seems like it should have taken more time before they shut him off anyway, unless he owed a lot of back money. My bill is generally around \$200 a month.”

“I’m sure he was able to pay. He might have forgot it. I don’t know.”

Alvin Golden, 55, lives two doors from Morgan. He was raised on the block and knew Morgan all his life. “I called him Mr. John or Mr. J. He was a real good guy. He was like a father to us, so I felt an obligation to help him.”

Golden said Morgan had become stubborn and set in his ways in his old age and would not accept help from anyone. “Three or four weeks ago my sister and me saw him walking out in the street. And he was a real tall man and he was slumped over so I ran out and walked with him to the restaurant to get something to eat and come back. I said, ‘Mr. John do you want me to bring you something to eat down here? There is no sense in you walking out in the street.’”

Alvin said he would have to take the initiative to help him and tried to get him to give his phone number. “He was real independent,” and depended on his truck to get around.

“I knew his truck wasn’t working so I would do whatever I could to help him out. Mark, next door, would cut his grass and shovel his snow.

“I don’t think anybody should have to die like that. It’s a terrible thing they shut him off for \$200 in the dead of the winter. Cutting people off their heat like

that is just plain wrong.”

Steve Walker, director of the county Community Action Resource Department, said the resources to avoid utility shutoffs and assist the poor have been scant in the past year. Programs that were available in the past have been “as thin as I have ever seen it,” Walker said, noting that programs that existed in the past are no longer available.

“There has been a radical change” in the assistance available, Walker added, noting that the stimulus money for home heating and money for programs such as the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) have been substantially cut.

When this reporter asked Walker if he was surprised to hear about the death of Morgan, an elderly autoworker, he paused. “Knowing what I know about the dimension of this crisis I would have to say no...I am shocked but not surprised.”



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