

Autopsy shows retired Michigan auto worker froze to death after utility shutoff

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A preliminary autopsy has found that John Morgan, an 86-year-old retired auto worker whose body was found in his truck Monday in Flint, Michigan, died of hypothermia and existing heart and lung problems. Morgan apparently sought to warm himself inside his truck after utility giant Consumers Energy cut off electricity to his house for an outstanding bill of \$291.

The report makes clear the elderly man froze to death after suffering without lights and heat in his home for three days and nights. The day neighbors found his body—Monday, February 20, temperatures in this central Michigan city dropped to as low as 16 degrees (Fahrenheit).

Morgan was found with his feet sticking out of the front door of his truck. One of Morgan's friends told the *World Socialist Web Site* his truck door was broken and he used electricity from his house to keep the battery charged (see, "Retired autoworker in Flint, Michigan dies after utilities are shut off"). Cutting power to his home would have led to the draining of Morgan's car battery. This would have left the elderly worker, most likely disoriented by the lack of heat and lights, without any transportation and means of escape.

Consumers Energy claimed it had no way of knowing Morgan was a senior citizen. Neighbors challenge that contention, noting the retired General Motors workers had lived in the same house—which he built—since 1955. They insist the company had to know he was elderly since they had been sending bills to the same customer for nearly six decades.

This horrible death only underscores the indifference of the utility corporations and the anti-social character of their drive for ever-greater profits. In 2007, Consumers Energy shut off utilities to 107,083 homes in Michigan. In 2011, it shut off gas and electricity to over 164,634 households, well over 50 percent increase

in shutoffs.

Flint, the birthplace of General Motors and the United Auto Workers union, once enjoyed the highest per capita income in the US. After three decades of plant closings and mass layoffs—aided and abetted by the UAW, Flint is now second only to Reading, Pennsylvania, for having the largest share of its residents living in poverty, according to the most recent census report.

These conditions have only been worsened by the funding cuts on the state and federal level, including a 25 percent cut ordered by the Obama administration in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Yet another cut in LIHEAP is scheduled for 2013.

"We are definitely going through what I would call a perfect storm with resources in the state," Steve Walker, director of the Genesee County Community Action Resource Department, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Historically, we have been committed to assisting people who are struggling to meet their emergency service needs. Due to a collection of overlapping factors those dollars have been radically reduced."

Walker said programs he administers in the Flint area are designed to assist workers such as Morgan but funding has been cut even though need has greatly increased. One program, called LIEEP (Low Income Energy Efficiency Program), was closed last year after a lawsuit challenged its legality. It was replaced with a state program with drastically reduced funds. "We had around \$200,000 to \$250,000 of LIEEP funding available last year," Walker said. "This year we have a little over \$90,000."

In addition, Walker said, "LIHEAP has been radically cut."

In the past, the program helped low-income residents weatherize their homes. “If the roof was in disrepair, or the home desperately needed a furnace, then we could address those issues and then do the weatherization measures that would significantly reduce that family’s heating bill.”

The cutbacks, Walker said, “is putting us and others in the position of not being available to help people with their shutoff situations.” Walker concluded by saying he had never seen such dire conditions in his 32-year history in the department.



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