

US death toll rises from heat wave and power outages

James Brewer
4 July 2012

So far, 23 deaths are attributed to the heat and related violent storms that ravaged the eastern United States on Friday. More are expected due to unrelenting heat and power outages. As of Tuesday night, 1.4 million remain without power in the seven-state area affected by the storms.

Huge trees were blown down by the up to 90-mile-an-hour winds from the derecho storms, knocking out power lines over wide areas.

The utility company for the Washington, DC area, Pepco, is the focus of widespread criticism for its failure to restore power in a timely manner. The situation is similar for customers of other utility companies in the eastern US.

Pepco claims that the sudden nature of the storms left them totally unprepared for the situation, and that the wide area affected by the storms meant that nearby crews could not be called in to assist damaged areas.

“We called five times, and they keep saying ‘Oh yeah, you’re a big priority,’” Mary Lou Kenary, DC-area resident told the Washington Post. Kenary, her husband, daughter, and severely disabled grandchild have been waiting since Saturday for Pepco to remove an electrical wire-covered telephone pole and tree from their driveway. “We called again this morning, and they said they had no record of us,” Kenary said. “We’re just so frustrated at how this has been mishandled.”

In fact, utility companies such as Pepco have been systematically cutting corners to boost profitability, with the support of both Democrats and Republicans.

The outdated method of distributing electricity through wires strung above ground makes it inevitable that storms will cause falling trees and branches to knock out power service. Utility companies in the US have universally refused to invest in a basic upgrade to their archaic infrastructure.

In addition, these private companies are all seeking

ways to cut their labor costs with layoffs and takeaways from their workers. Currently, Con Ed, the power provider to New York, has recently locked out 8,500 employees for rejecting concessions.

Day to day life in urban neighborhoods has been totally disrupted. In many neighborhoods of Baltimore, residents have no running water in addition to no power. Residents across the region who have been without power have been forced to throw away the contents of their refrigerators due to the outage—a waste of much of a family’s monthly income and nutrition.

Vital infrastructure has also been disrupted. The loss of traffic signals in the DC area is causing dangerous driving conditions. Many smaller pediatric and other clinics without power have had to call on local hospitals to store their supplies of vaccines, which have to be refrigerated. For several days, 911 emergency call centers had no way of responding to those in need of help.

Municipalities have publicized lists of cooling center locations for people trying to stay cool, either for lack of air conditioning or electricity. These locations are often public libraries, but no resources have been provided to accommodate those seeking to avoid the high temperatures, either to keep them open longer hours, or open up special rooms.

In Washington, DC the oldest areas inside the beltway were hardest hit by the storm. Most have been without power for four days. Even before the storm hit, many heat stroke victims were taken to hospitals, and heat exhaustion was common.

In the Virginia area near DC, a WSWS reporter found that many sites listed as cooling centers did not even have power. Private locations, such as shopping malls, theaters and restaurants were often overcrowded with people seeking refuge from the heat.

Patrick, a volunteer firefighter in Fairfax County Virginia, spoke to the WSWS about the utility company’s

claim not to be responsible for tree branches overhanging power lines. “I don’t think it’s even legal for private citizens to go up there to try and cut the branches,” he said, “let alone the issue of being able to afford it by hiring people. That’s something that should definitely be taken care of by the company.”

He added, “This really demonstrates the need for utilities in times of crisis, and how they are undermined by companies trying to save themselves and their bottom line.”

Even without the catastrophic effects of the storms, the intense heat itself presents dangerous conditions for millions of people. According to the National Weather Service, heat is the leading cause of weather-related fatalities in the US. Those most at risk are infants, seniors and those with chronic medical conditions.

High heat is predicted through the end of the week. Temperatures can be as high as 105 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius), without ever cooling below 90.

Since Saturday, the following heat-related fatalities in the US have been recorded:

- * Three died from heat exhaustion in Maryland
- * Two boys in Tennessee died after playing outside in temperatures near 105 degrees Fahrenheit.
- * Three elderly people died in St. Louis, Missouri due to lack of air conditioning.
- * A homeless man in Kansas City was found dead inside a mobile home where the temperature was over 115 degrees, and a 72 year-old man without air conditioning was found dead in his home.
- * An 84-year-old woman collapsed in a South Carolina nursing home, subsequently dying in the hospital.

Meteorologists at the National Weather Service office in Sterling, Virginia are predicting more severe weather in Maryland, based on observations of storms developing over the Great Lakes Tuesday morning and heading eastward.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact