

“We should have the opportunity to live a decent, respectable lifestyle”

WSWS interviews two Detroit mothers about their conditions

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The WSWS recently spoke to two mothers, Patrice and Donna, about conditions of life in Detroit, where jobs are scarce and pay is so low.

Patrice, 23, was one of those affected by the cuts to the welfare system implemented by both Democrats and Republicans. Both she and Donna lost custody of children as a result of their dire poverty.

Patrice is preparing for the homecoming of her youngest child, Isaiah, and is fighting to regain custody of her three-year-old, Trevon. Donna, her godmother, relates that she has also “walked in Patrice’s shoes” and provides her all the support she can.

Many of their concerns were highlighted in the recently released Kids Count report, released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The subsection on Detroit documents the city’s catastrophic slide into poverty, alongside the impoverishment of a large and growing section of the working poor and unemployed throughout the United States.

Patrick McCarthy, the foundation’s president and CEO, cited the growth of the “extreme poor” and the fact that many children are being separated from their families by state intervention. Over 111,000 Children’s Protective Services complaints were brought in Michigan this fiscal year. A CPS complaint is the first step in the system through which children are removed from a home. A child can be taken from his or her parents for “neglect,” which includes the lack of food in the refrigerator, no utilities in the home or failure to provide a clean and adequate home.

The situation facing Michigan’s poorest has been made immeasurably worse since the state began cutting off hundreds of families each month from cash benefits. The draconian measures strictly enforce the federal 60-month lifetime limit or the state’s 48-month limit (whichever is sooner), enacted by Democrats Bill Clinton and Jennifer Granholm, and most recently Republican Governor Rick Snyder. Altogether at least 30,000 children will be affected. Many families have been made homeless and some are “doubling up.”

One of the direct effects of loss of benefits has been the worsening utilities crisis. A WSWS investigation revealed approximately one million Michigan residents lived at least part of last year without utilities. While this summer’s brutally hot weather has taken its toll on

those living without air conditioning or, in some cases, refrigeration, last week DTE Energy’s stocks posted their highest ever level since been publicly traded in 1980.

“I was homeless between 2008 and 2009,” said Patrice. “Youth homelessness in Detroit is severe. Covenant House of Michigan for ages 18-24 is overcrowded, over capacity. The same is true for the Alternative House for Girls, Genesis House II and III, Off the Streets [for ages 13 to 17]—all of these places are overcrowded. They will put two children in with the mother in one bed.

“For that reason, when my son Trevon was born, I voluntarily put him up for guardianship. The agreement was for six months, but it has now been three-and-a-half years, and I have been fighting to get him back for three years.

“I have contacted Legal Aid on more than one occasion, but they stated they cannot handle probate court. I tried Neighborhood Legal Services. I contacted the Salvation Army legal team and they said they couldn’t help me. So I spend \$40 every time I file a petition in court, but I have no legal representation at all.

“I have rented an apartment,” Patrice continued, “and my worker from the Catholic Social Services paid the light bill from her own personal credit card so that I could get my utilities on and bring my youngest son Isaiah home, but I have still not been allowed to regain custody of Trevon.

“But when I got there and flipped on the switch, there was no power. I called DTE. I went downstairs and asked the maintenance man if he would unlock the meter room, as DTE was en route. He said he’d have to ask the manager, but the manager said it needed to be a different maintenance man. The landlord said one could available the next day, Saturday. So I got up at 7:30 am and called DTE again, requesting that they call me when they got to the building. Again, DTE wasn’t allowed in. DTE then told me they were going to charge me \$75 for each time they had to come out.”

Donna explained, “I was on the phone with her. They told her that according to the computer files, the power was on in her name. But every time they came out, she will be charged \$75. She is already on a limited income. Patrice is already cutting into her funds that she needs to provide for her rent or for necessities for her child. She is at her

wits' end because her son is coming home in three weeks. If she doesn't have her lights, they will not return her child. She has a roof over her head, but she can't use it."

"Well," said Patrice, "DTE then said there were no legal utilities in the building, except for mine. In other words, everyone else has an illegal hookup. I think that's why the landlord didn't let DTE in, because he is aware of that. The manager is no doubt afraid that DTE will come in and turn everybody off. Meanwhile the building itself is in foreclosure."

"I've been through the system with my children too," Donna told the WWS. "I cannot only sympathize, but empathize. I've walked in her shoes. We, people with limited income, should be afforded the opportunity to live a decent, respectable lifestyle without interruptions or the worry that utilities will be interrupted."

"I was also one of those they cut on welfare," continued Patrice. "I was only receiving \$309 plus Social Security. I received no child support. They said my income exceeded the state limitation and they eliminated it, as well as cutting the food stamps. They brought me down from \$409 to \$250 a month—but those little cans of Enfamil are expensive!"

"It's the children that are really suffering in the process. The system will keep denying things like daycare, as they did for my son."

"To keep the Department of Human Services [DHS] at bay," Donna pointed out, "some parents will go to COTS or another shelter to tide themselves over. But they come back with bed bugs and bites all over. If Child Protective Services see this, they will take the child for neglect. A lot of families are moving out of state because of this."

"I'd say a quarter of the people in Detroit alone are living without utilities—just multiply that by each city in the state! This type of life means a disruption of family, a breakdown of trust, loyalty and communication."

Patrice added, "It means more children in foster care." She explained that her situation has been a nightmare. "The court system is unfair. The guardian makes all the decisions about my child. Further, she took my information and signed up for debit cards and student loans—all in my name. Meanwhile, the letters of guardianship have expired. They expired last month; I believe they are keeping my son just for the state support money."

"The court is now claiming my son is autistic, but I've seen no medical records. The hospital won't release the records to me, but I do know he is not up to date on his shots and hasn't been to see the dentist in a year. I have voiced my concerns to the judge repeatedly. I have not lost my parental rights, so I don't know why I am having such a hard time."

"Once CPS reports you, they will come as often as every day, and they'll often come with the sheriff. If they get an allegation of no utilities, they'll open the refrigerator to see if the utilities are on. The utilities have to be in your name. The house has to be clean, they'll open all the drawers. If they find a problem, the children automatically go into foster care. Everyone in my building is battling CPS."

Donna pointed out that she has two other goddaughters whose children are in foster care because of no utilities. "Their income was not sufficient to pay it. If you get a job, the DHS will cut your benefits, including food stamps. They already cut the cash. Your lights go out and you are evicted and can't get fresh food. No one wants to drink sour milk. No one wants to wear dirty clothes, but you don't have electricity. Folks are selling their Bridge cards [food stamps] to try to pay their utilities and going in garbage cans to get food."

"Mothers are called unfit, neglectful, abusive because their children are becoming malnourished. It is running rampant. People are caught in the middle of a situation that can only be described as 'garbage,' and they can't crawl out. Every time they start to, the system throws something on top of them to keep them back under."

"They claim you should go find a job, but they know there are no jobs."

"Children are growing up without their brothers and sisters and there are more men in the prison system. Crimes are becoming more and more violent. Why do they have to die like that? It's people of all races, they just only report some of them."

Asked about the effect of the recent budget cuts to welfare in Michigan, Donna said, "One effect is that parents are putting their children out at earlier ages because they can't afford to feed them. They figure, at 13, the child should 'get out and do something' and perhaps do better because parents can't afford to provide them a home. It means prostitution at earlier ages, using drugs earlier and the development of psychosis earlier. These kids have separation complexes; they are too young to deal with adulthood."

"The auto industry used to be it. There used to be a good education here, now it's gone. The cuts in the education system mean our youth don't stand much of a chance. They aren't afforded the education I was—I went to Catholic school and Highland Park Community College. I am a paralegal. But now we've had the downfall of the auto industry and the upsurge of all the illegitimate things going on, I think our youth are almost doomed."

"Our youth don't stand a chance without people like you making others aware of what is happening in these neighborhoods. They need to stop thinking I'll 'go along to get along' and say 'I want things better for the children.' But right now it's not out there for them, no matter how hard you struggle."



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