Unrelenting cold snap grips wide area of US

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Record low temperatures continue across the northern Midwest region of the US and Northeast as meteorologists predict the cold snap to continue at least into the coming week. The spread of Arctic air has brought consistently subfreezing temperatures from Idaho to the eastern seaboard and into the Deep South.

The National Weather Service forecasts daytime high temperatures for most of the northern US will be 10 to 30 degrees below normal through Wednesday. Under these brutal conditions, the homeless, elderly and the poor are most vulnerable, forced to fend for themselves in many cases due to the dwindling social safety net.

Near Fulton, Mississippi on Tuesday, four people were killed in a trailer park fire that was attributed to the use of a space heater. Overnight temperatures plummeted to 20 to 24 degrees Fahrenheit (-7 Celsius) with chilling winds.

Three children, Shelby Casen, 17, Kaden Angle, 3, and Anna Clair Chilcoat, 2, died at the scene and Susan Chilcoat, 35, died of her injuries at a hospital in Tupelo. Three other children and two adults were taken to various hospitals for treatment. All but two, Addison Chilcoat, 2, and David Slane Angle, 27, have been released.

Because winter in the South is usually mild, when it gets very cold space heaters are used commonly as a temporary source of warmth. Authorities warn users to take precautions with their use, which are difficult, if not impossible, in overcrowded living conditions associated with poverty, particularly in mobile homes.

More than 21 cold-related deaths were reported this winter in the US. Cook County, Illinois alone has reported 14 deaths. Wisconsin reported four probable cold-related deaths.

In the city of Stewart, in central Minnesota, a man in his 50s was found frozen to death after a search by both the sheriff's office and fire department. He was reported missing Monday morning. His body was found two-and-a-half miles from his car, after he had apparently gotten stuck while driving home in blizzard-like conditions.

McLeod County Sheriff Scott Rehmann told the press that the man probably tried to walk home, which was just a few miles away, but never made it. "It's open fields for miles, and the wind kicks up, blows a lot of snow, and a lot of drifts were on the roads at that time," Rehman said. He added, "When it's 20 below [-29 Celsius] and you throw in the wind chill factor, and it's minus 40s with the wind chill factor, you can succumb to that temperature pretty fast."

A January 24 ThinkProgress.org article, titled "At Least Five Homeless People Froze To Death Last Week," noted the death of 55-year-old Willie Mae White, a woman who lived at a bus stop in Joliet, Illinois. She froze to death at the same bus stop.

The article reported the deaths of four other homeless people the same week: Glenn Donovan, 53, of Highland Falls, New York, and three unidentified men—one in Philadelphia, one in Jersey City and one in Chicago.

Cold weather is particularly dangerous for older and elderly people. Continued exposure to cold can result in hypothermia, which exacerbates other physical problems suffered by older people, such as heart disease.

Weather.com meteorologist Chris Dolce reported, "Dangerously cold temperatures will continue in the Midwest for the start of the workweek with wind chills in the -20s, -30s and -40s." The persistent cold is responsible for many school and business closings, traffic accidents and several deaths. Winter cold and snow advisories are being issued across the eastern two-thirds of the US.

According to Accuweather.com, "The magnitude of this cold blast will be enough to produce a far-reaching threat of frostbite, hypothermia, frozen pipes and water

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main breaks."

The polar front has extended south into areas that seldom have below-freezing temperatures, causing unexpected hardship for residents of Southern states. Charleston and Savannah, Georgia are facing their first winter storm watch in four years. Icy road conditions have caused accidents and fatalities as far south as Mississippi and Texas.

High winds not only make it feel much colder, they rapidly change road conditions, freezing road surfaces, instantly transforming an apparently clear and safe road to an icy death trap. Multiple-car accidents and jackknifed semi-trucks are common occurrences.

Many experts predict this winter will be one of the coldest in history. In Michigan, the major cities have already had more snowfall than their average for the entire season. Detroit has already had 10 inches more snow than a normal winter would bring.

Jeffrey Goodman of Mentor, Ohio spoke to CNN News on the cold. "It gets cold in northeast Ohio, but it's been awhile since we have had this many days of temperatures in the single digits," Goodman said.

The relentless bitter cold has driven up heating bills across the US. Twelve states have declared energy emergencies this winter, as the demand for propane gas, used particularly in rural areas, has caused prices to skyrocket.

In rural Minnesota, at the end of last week, suppliers quoted propane prices of $4.75 a gallon. One year ago it was $1.59. One customer told KTOE News in Mankato, Minnesota that at those prices, a 200-gallon tank would cost about $1,000 and in this weather would only last three weeks.

Jeff LaPan, an account manager for Propane CHS Inc., a wholesaler in Iowa, said, "Inventories of propane have dropped quickly enough that it's possible the state could run short on supplies by mid-February unless demand slackens.

Low-income residents are hit hardest. Even without the severity of the current winter, energy assistance has been continually slashed. The 2014 budget for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is just 90 percent of what it was in 2013. As more workers have had to endure economic hardship over the last several years, needing energy assistance, LIHEAP funding has been continually cut. Current funding is barely half of what it was four years ago.

Homeless shelters across the US are being filled to capacity, as the polar conditions make it impossible to remain out of doors. Some are without enough cots to provide for those seeking a warm night's sleep. Stephanie Brown, a case manager at the Pine Street Inn, told the *Boston Globe*, "We pretty much lay them out anywhere we have space," as 15 men laid on the floor near a heating vent.

Just one month ago, around the holiday season, ice storms across the northern US and Canada resulted in the loss of electric power for hundreds of thousands.

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