Winter storm paralyzes Atlanta, Georgia, stranding thousands

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A winter storm moving through the American Deep South hit Atlanta, Georgia, Tuesday, bringing 2.6 inches of snow, ice and freezing temperatures. The event paralyzed the city, which was totally unprepared. The storm resulted in mass gridlock throughout the metro area, stranding thousands.

Drivers on major highways were trapped in their cars for extended periods without food or water, some up to 2 days. More than 10,000 kindergarten through 12th grade students in the metro area were stranded at schools Tuesday night, including 239 students forced to sleep aboard school buses in traffic. Students reportedly did not make it home until Wednesday evening.

Hazardous driving conditions led to thousands of automobile accidents. In Atlanta, police received over 7,500 calls for 911 and Georgia State Patrol officers responded to 1,460 car crashes between Tuesday morning and Wednesday evening. Officials reported 2 fatal crashes as well as 175 injuries. Snowplows were unable to reach the most affected areas due to the large areas of gridlock paralyzing the city's roadways. Many traveling through the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airport were also temporarily stranded, which had announced almost 1,000 flight cancellations by Wednesday afternoon.

Although the National Weather Service put the Atlanta area under a winter storm warning at 3:38 a.m. Tuesday morning, city officials made relatively no preparations. The Atlanta metro area did not announce any office closures until Tuesday between noon and 2 p.m., once the snow had already begun to fall. The Atlanta Public Schools system dismissed middle school students at 1:30 p.m., elementary school students at 2:30 p.m., and high school students at 3:30 p.m.

Despite warnings from meteorologists, Georgia Governor Nathan Deal reportedly called the storm "unexpected," claiming that nobody "could have predicted the degree and magnitude of the problem." City and state officials were reluctant to post warnings to close schools and businesses until the last minute on Tuesday.

Deal responded to criticism for the state's lack of response by saying: "We don't want to be accused of crying wolf." As of Thursday evening, small patches of ice were still present on bridges and smaller city streets. Georgia officials have lifted fees in order to tow 2,029 abandoned vehicles from the sides of interstate roads. Stranded motorists have begun attempting to retrieve their abandoned vehicles.

Atlanta, a city of 6 million, is spread over a large area spanning multiple counties. Although it has a public transportation system, it is only available to a small fraction of residents in the metro area. The vast majority of residents rely on automobiles to make commutes to and from work. The thousands stranded on the roads had little to no forewarning about the dangerous weather conditions and virtually no assistance.

Like most American cities, Atlanta has suffered waves of layoffs and budget cuts to essential city and social services. Former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin cut 1,100 positions in 2002. In 2009, Franklin announced that 441 city workers would be laid off and an additional 347 positions would be eliminated.

The largest cuts have been in the city's public works, police and fire departments. Current Mayor Kasim Reed had just returned to Atlanta after attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Other parts of the Deep South experienced similar hazards due to inclement weather and lack of infrastructure. Six states have declared a state of emergency. According to USA Today, there have been

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at least 13 confirmed deaths throughout the region as a whole. In Mississippi, a family of four with a three month-old infant were killed during a mobile home fire due to a faulty space heater. Alabama was particularly hard hit, with 5 deaths reported statewide, and 11,375 Alabama children were forced to spend the night at schools Tuesday.

The city of Birmingham experienced a city-wide crisis much like Atlanta. Gridlock left residents stranded or forced them to abandon their vehicles. Workers were stranded at businesses across the city for days. Between Tuesday and Wednesday, police dispatchers sent emergency crews to 189 traffic accidents in Birmingham alone. Birmingham is the seat of Jefferson County, which filed the largest municipal bankruptcy in history in October 2011.

There have been nearly two thousand reports of accidents or abandoned vehicles in North and South Carolina, and Mississippi officials reported over 600 automobile crashes since Tuesday. Louisiana closed over 20 highways due to severe icing, including Interstate-10 between Lafayette, Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

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