

Testimony reveals public health danger and suffering caused by Detroit water shutoffs

Lawrence Porter
26 September 2014

Victims of water shutoffs and public health experts testified this week on the impact of the city's policy during a hearing at a US Federal bankruptcy court. They provided details of the health danger and the human suffering caused by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department's (DWSD) campaign to shut off as many as 150,000 households for late payments.

The lawsuit was brought by a coalition of liberal and "left" organizations, including Workers World Party and the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, which are seeking a temporary delay in shutoffs in order to help the water department craft a supposedly more humane shutoff policy. Judge Steven Rhodes will rule on the lawsuit Monday. (See: "Detroit officials defend water shutoffs")

Despite the political bankruptcy of such an outlook, the testimony at the hearing provided damning evidence of the social crime being perpetrated against low-income workers, the unemployed and retirees in Detroit.

Tracy Peasant, the first of five Detroit residents to testify, cried on the stand explaining she had to buy bottled water for herself and the eight children she took care of, four of whom are her grandchildren.

"It was hard," stated Peasant, who had an \$8,500 water bill. Peasant explained the bill was due to a water leak in a house she was renting. She said she only makes \$259 a month, lives in Section 8 housing (a federal housing assistance program for low income families) and pays \$110 a month to DTE Energy for gas and electricity utilities.

Maurika Lyda, who lives with her four kids on Rogge Street on the west side of Detroit, said her bill was more than a \$1,000 when it was shut off. Lyda said she never received a notice the service would be shut off and that on one day, she said, "7-8 houses were shut

off" on her street.

"Children were forced to move in with other families," stated Lyda. She testified she was forced to bathe in a sink after warming up bottled water.

Nicole Cannon, who is on Social Security, has water but is in danger of a shutoff because of her low income and the high cost of the agreement she recently made under the new 10/30/50 Plan established by Detroit's Mayor Mike Duggan.

The payment plan was instituted in August to quell mass opposition to the shutoffs. Part of the plan stipulates that a resident can enter into a payment agreement by paying 10 percent—instead of the tradition 30 percent—of the old bill to prevent a shutoff. The cost of the payment is then added to another payment plan for the current bill. Cannon's experience showed that the agreements are so high they are unsustainable.

Cannon said she had a water bill over \$3,000. She receives \$648 a month from Social Security and her monthly rent is \$109. In order to keep her service she paid \$382 to the DWSD. When she was asked how much she has to pay each month based on the payment plan, Cannon said it is a total of \$241.42, a cost that, she said, "I cannot sustain."

"I'm aggressive getting all the help I can," stated Cannon who came to the court with an oxygen tank because she has Sarcoidosis, a potentially fatal inflammatory disease that can affect the lungs, lymphatic system and the heart.

George Douglas Gaines Jr., the former deputy director of Herman Kiefer Hospital, a publicly owned Detroit hospital closed due to budget cuts, testified about the dangers of water shutoffs to the public.

"When water is shut off this means you do not have a toilet you can flush. This means you must make some provision safely to get rid of human waste. That means

you also don't have water to wash your hands. You begin to think immediately about what are the diseases that can result from an unsanitary way of defecating.”

Households living without water posed several health dangers to the wider public. Some of the diseases listed by Gaines were Hepatitis and Salmonella, both of which are passed on either orally or through feces and Giardiasis, an intestinal disease caused by microscopic parasites prevalent in areas with poor sanitation and unsafe water. “This is more prevalent in children and older people, usually and spread from hand to mouth,” Gaines states. Another disease that poses a danger is cholera.

Gaines said each disease was communicable and could easily spread from one person to another, a problem that especially poses a danger for children. When asked if a child could pass on one of the diseases in a school environment, Gaines said, “The diseases I just enumerated, none of them are airborne. They all require that the infection occurs because the infected person had direct contact with some other person.”

Gaines said he had a concern, “because of the campaign to shut off water. If it were one individual, I don't think that would be that much of a community health problem. But when you start talking about thousands of people without the ability to flush their toilet, and to wash their hands, then I think you put the community at risk for communicable diseases that can get into the water or the food that people consume.”

Gaines also raised social concerns about children in a home without water, because the house—from a public health and safety point of view—is uninhabitable. “If a child is in an uninhabitable situation, Protective Services could be concerned about that,” stating this relates to children as well as seniors.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact