

# Hazel Park, Michigan retiree dies of hypothermia after gas shutoff

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Funeral services were held Monday for John Skelley Jr., age 69, a retired factory worker who died of hypothermia February 1, after his gas was shut off by regional power monopoly Consumers Energy at his home in Hazel Park, a working class suburb just outside of Detroit.

Skelley, a Vietnam War veteran, was living with a roommate at the time, who owed an outstanding balance of \$760.28. According to published reports, Consumers disconnected service on January 19, in the midst of a bitterly cold Midwest winter. The Michigan Public Services Commission (MPSA) says the state has a policy prohibiting the shutoff of services in winter to those over age 65. The state of Michigan, has now ordered Consumers to issue a report over the incident.

Hazel Park police reported that they found Skelley unresponsive, huddled under blankets next to a space heater. The medical examiner ruled that hypothermia was a major factor in his death. The high temperature was 18 Fahrenheit (minus 8 Celsius) the day he died, with a low of 2 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 19 Celsius).

Skelley is survived by five children and seven grandchildren. According to family, Skelley worked for 30 years at Phoenix Wire Cloth, a stainless steel wire mesh manufacturer. He was suffering from throat cancer at the time of his death, which undoubtedly weakened his resistance to the cold. He had been recently estranged from family members, who were unsure of his whereabouts.

The death of Skelley is the latest needless tragedy resulting from the relentless profit drive of the gas and electric monopolies. According to the MPSA, Consumers Energy disconnected 164,604 gas and electric customers in 2014. The same year, the state's other major gas and electric utility, DTE Energy, shut off 206,799 households.

It comes as the city of Detroit is continuing a brutal policy of water shutoffs, disconnecting service to tens of thousands of households for unpaid bills as little as \$150.

Tanya Mitchell, a daughter of John Skelley, works as a cashier in a restaurant. She said about the shutoff of gas to her father's home, "There is a lot of it going on everywhere. It was a shock. I am highly upset. My father was quiet. But he was willing to help out when he could."

After Skelley's death came to public attention due to the efforts of a veterans' aid organization, Consumers Energy issued a self-serving statement professing sadness over the death. Consumers issued the standard claim that there are many services available to those having difficulty paying bills. In reality, assistance programs are overwhelmed. For example, The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW) reported 14,000 calls, mostly in the Metro Detroit area, in the month of January alone.

Skelley's roommate told police he had tried to get help with the bill, but was turned down because there were no children living in the home.

In a public relations move earlier this month, Consumers announced it was giving \$9 million—a tiny portion of the profits it gouges every month from customers—in heating assistance to local charities. In any event, as Consumers no doubt calculates, the money will be funneled back into its own bank account.

Tanya commented, "I think it might be a front. If you are sorry, why did you shut off the heat for a 69-year-old man? I understand that every business has to be concerned about profit, but they have to be concerned about the customers too. Maybe gas companies should take account of what people earn. That would be helpful."

"I had a friend of mine say, 'don't shut people off in

the winter, people will freeze.’ We had a problem once with DTE Energy. We went through a payment plan. But for some it is too much, they can’t meet the minimum requirements. It is hard nowadays to keep up with everything.”

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has imposed cuts to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, (LIHEAP) whose funds have been reduced by 30 percent since 2009. The White House plans to freeze LIHEAP in next year’s budget at its current level.

Skelley’s death recalls the death of 93-year-old Marvin E. Schur of Bay City, Michigan, who died in January 2009, after the local power company restricted his access to electricity by putting a “limiter” on the house.

John Skelley Jr, 35, spoke to the WSWS after his father’s funeral. “I heard that he was living with a friend and that he withdrew \$800 on January 15 to help with the bills. On January 19 they turned off the utilities. So I don’t know what happened.

“He was living there for three years. The previous apartment he lived in on Woodward Heights burned down. He had been living in Hazel Park ever since.”

John Jr., who works as a water-proofer for basements, said he hadn’t seen his dad in a year. “I think there could have been more done than just shutting off their utilities. They could have knocked on the door or something. None of that happened.”

Freya Keener, 28, another of John Skelley’s daughters said, “the utilities shouldn’t have been shut off, especially with the extreme cold weather we have been having.

“He roomed in an apartment with a friend. Consumer’s claims they didn’t know he was there, but they could have waited until they go through the worst of the season. They didn’t have to do it when it was freezing outside.”

Tanya’s half-brother Adam added, “I think it is sad that a veteran froze to death over monetary issues. I think there should be a program in place to help those who cannot provide for themselves.

“This problem seems to be widespread.” He commented on the water shutoffs taking place in Detroit, “So many people depend on water. You need to cook and clean. There should be some sort of support system there.”



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