

Detroit to resume water shutoffs this month

Tyler Van Dyke
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Detroit, the poorest large city in America, is set to resume mass water shutoffs for tens of thousands of households in the coming weeks.

Residents who are 60 days behind or owing \$150 or more on their water bills will have shutoff notices placed on their doors beginning May 11. They will be allowed only 10 days to pay their bills or file for assistance before their water is turned off.

City officials have said that as many as 25,000 households are behind on their water bills. Assuming an average household size of three, the shutoffs could affect more than ten percent of the city's population.

Last year, more than 30,000 households had their water service disconnected. The city temporarily suspended shutoffs over the winter, as cold temperatures made them impracticable.

The city has already begun shutting off water service to 8,000 accounts it claims are receiving water illegally.

Detroit's water shutoff policy is intimately connected with the city's bankruptcy, which slashed retirees' health care and pension benefits while privatizing city services and handing over public assets to well-connected speculators.

The bankruptcy paved the way for the spin-off of the city's water department to a regional authority, in preparation for its ultimate privatization. This process has been accompanied by a draconian program of water shutoffs and rate increases aimed at making the future water authority attractive to investors.

This year, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department announced a rate increase of 3.4 percent for Detroit residents, including a 16 percent increase for the sewerage portion of the bill. The surrounding municipalities will have water rate increases of as much as 12 percent.

Detroit's water shutoff policy has drawn condemnation from the United Nations, which declared that "Disconnection of water services because of failure

to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights."

In a stunning example of Orwellean doublespeak, DWSD Director Sue McCormick said in a statement last month that the goal of the water department was "to make sure that our customers can keep their water on."

Gary Brown, the city's chief operating officer, told the *Detroit Free Press* that assistance is available to anyone who needs it. He declared, "The bottom line is whether you are in that [shutoff] category or not, you need to come in and get on a payment plan." Brown added, "Then you will be assured that your water will not be cut off."

He did not mention the fact that while the total amount of unpaid water bills in the city is estimated at \$42 million, only some \$4.2 million is available in relief. Mathematics dictates that the available funds will only help a small share of those in need, leaving the rest without one of the most fundamental requirements of civilized life.

The *Detroit News* noted that the assistance program has received only 3,800 applicants since August, a fraction of the tens of thousands of households whose water was shut off during that time. Only half of the applications were approved. Furthermore, more than 30 percent of qualified households have been unable to make payments, placing them in danger of shutoff.

Facing widespread criticism of the completely inadequate assistance program, the Duggan administration introduced certain tweaks to its rules, including raising the maximum balance covered by the assistance program. However, none of this changes the fact that the resources provided are woefully inadequate to the need, and that tens of thousands of households will inevitably be left without water as a result.

Officials are also working on a new income-based

assistance program, with the collaboration of various community and civil rights groups, to be rolled out in July under the new Great Lakes Water Authority. But even this program would offer a pittance in aid: \$6 million, or slightly more than is currently available.

Last year, US bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes ruled against a challenge to the city's water shutoff policy, declaring that there is no "fundamental enforceable right to free or affordable water... Just as there is no such affordable right to other necessities of life such as shelter, food and medical care."

As the WSWS had warned, the decision to carry out mass water shutoffs in Detroit has set a precedent for other cities throughout the United States. Earlier this year, the city of Baltimore announced that it would begin shutting off water to as many as 25,000 residents.



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