

# Mass water shutoffs continue in Detroit, Michigan

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Two years after the city of Detroit instituted a policy of mass service disconnections of past due water accounts, the city is shutting off some 150 customers a day with no letup in sight. The shutoffs continued through the recent summer heat wave, with temperatures reaching the 90s for days in a row.

At this point about 1 in 13 of Detroit's 175,000 residential accounts have had their water shut off. Detroit water bills average about \$75 a month, under conditions where more than 40 percent of city residents live in poverty. According to guidelines set by the US Environmental Protection Agency, water bills should comprise no more than 2.5 percent of family income. In Detroit that figure is more like 10 percent.

Currently some 44,000 Detroit households are on payment plans, out of a total of 175,000 in the city, according to Detroit Water and Sewerage Department Director Gary Brown. Those who default on their plans face the possibility of service disconnection.

According to a report Wednesday in the *Detroit News*, while family homes comprise little more than one half of the reported \$119 million in past due water bills, they account for nearly all of the water shutoffs. There are currently about 11,000 residential customers 60 days or more in arrears and at risk of shutoff. The average outstanding bill is \$1,235.

Since 2014 the administration of Detroit's Democratic mayor Mike Duggan has shut off almost 65,000 residences. That means that one-third of all homes in the city have faced losing water, a vital service essential to life in a modern civilized society. The city says it does not keep a record of the number of occupied homes that lack water service, but the number must be substantial.

City officials tout the existence of water payment assistance programs, but the funds available are

absurdly inadequate. A Water Residential Assistance Program that started last March has funding of only \$4.5 million. According to a recent report 2,081 households enrolled, with a backlog of 2,500-3,000 households. The program provides up to \$1,000 toward a monthly bill credit of \$25 in addition to help with arrears. The program requires customers to sign up for a monthly payment plan, but reportedly only 28 percent of all households could make all payments. Nearly one-half missed one payment and 12 percent missed two.

The program is available to residents in the area covered by the Great Lakes Water Authority set up to run the DWSD in the wake of the Detroit bankruptcy. It comprises Detroit and dozens of surrounding suburban communities.

Another program, the 10/30/50 plan, requires customers to pay ten percent of their past due amount, with the balance due in installments over a period of 12 to 24 months. If a customer defaults, they must pay 30 percent of the past due amount. If a customer defaults a second time they must pay 50 percent.

The pittance allocated for assistance with water bills pales in comparison to the \$170 million handed out by the federal government for so called blight removal in Detroit. This involves the mass demolition of vacant homes, some habitable, to open up areas of the city for redevelopment by wealthy investors.

The water shutoffs come in the wake of a wave of foreclosures impacting some 110,000 residences. The net effect of water shutoffs, foreclosures and mass demolitions has been to depopulate areas of the city, driving out poorer residents.

The main motivation behind the unrelenting water shutoffs is a plan to privatize the Detroit water system. The city is attempting to increase the attractiveness of the Detroit water system by increasing cash collections

and eliminating past due accounts.

The folding of the municipally owned DWSD into the Great Lakes Water Authority in 2014 was the first step in the direction of outright privatization of the system. The move corporatized the DWSD, putting unelected officials in charge of its operations and running it on a business basis. The establishment of the new authority freed the DWSD from control by the City Council, which under provisions of the City Charter had to seek voter approval before privatization.

In October 2014 United Nations experts called on the city to end its policy of mass water shutoffs, calling it a violation of human rights. One expert declared, “It is contrary to human rights to disconnect water from people who simply do not have the means to pay their bills.”

The water crisis in Detroit parallels the crisis in Flint, Michigan caused by the lead contamination of the water system serving the city’s 100,000 residents. The decision to implement mass water shutoffs in Detroit followed soon on the heels of the decision to shift Flint’s water supply from the DWSD to the polluted Flint River. The Flint River water leached lead from the city’s antiquated piping, leading to the poisoning of city residents.

In the cases of both Flint and Detroit public officials reacted with indifference to the outcry of residents. In a visit to Flint in May, President Barack Obama tried to trivialize the disaster, downplaying the danger to children from ingesting lead, insisting, “these kids will be fine.” He made these remarks even though it is well known that exposure to even small amounts of lead is known to cause serious health problems in children, including learning and behavioral disabilities.

The lack of access to safe water in Flint and Detroit, which once boasted among the highest standards of living in the United States, is especially criminal considering that the region is in the middle of the Great Lakes, which hold 21 percent of the world’s supply of fresh water. It is a testament to the incompatibility of the capitalist profit system with the basic requirements of modern life.



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