

Thousands still without power in metro Detroit

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13 March 2017

At the time of this writing, 70,000 customers of utility monopoly DTE Energy in the greater Detroit area were still without power following a windstorm last Wednesday. The weather event wreaked havoc on the aging power grid in southeastern Michigan, causing mass outages and electrical fires. By Thursday morning, 670,000 DTE customers were without power in addition to 350,000 Consumers Energy customers further west and north across the state.

The crumbling infrastructure in metro Detroit has resulted in disaster for the region. Winds reached over 60 mph, according to some reports, and DTE claimed it was the largest mass storm outage in its history, prone to violent and often unpredictable weather. The energy giant claimed that it was expecting to have power back on for all of its customers by 11:30 pm Monday, meaning no power for as long as five days for some.

A Brookings analysis of the 2010-2014 census numbers concluded that Detroit is the poorest big city in the US. Large sections of the population live without access to utilities and rely on assistance from local warming centers, especially during cold winters. These centers struggled to keep up with the increased number of people seeking shelter from the freezing temperatures over the weekend.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder said the effect on the electrical system was “unprecedented” and activated the State Emergency Operations Center on Wednesday in response to the storm. This declaration, however, provided little practical assistance to hundreds of thousands coping with the impact of the power outage.

While the energy giant advised those without power to avoid using generators, which can potentially cause deadly carbon monoxide leaks, the freezing temperatures provided little alternative to many.

Sunday morning 70 miles west of Detroit in Leoni Township, 75-year-old Lonnie Sibbet and 70-year-old Leona Sibbet were found dead in their homes due to an apparent carbon monoxide leak.

One metro Detroit resident impacted by the outage told the WSWs, “I was without power for three days along with hundreds in my neighborhood. It took more than 24 hours for DTE to provide their first estimate of when service would be restored.

“Without power it was absolutely impossible to stay at home in the freezing weather. I heard many accounts, including first-hand accounts, of people being gouged by local motels, charging as much as double their usual rates.

“People lost all the perishable items in their freezers along with days missed from work and I expect we will get no compensation from DTE. They claim this was an exceptional weather event, but this is not the first time people in my neighborhood have experienced outages, sometime for as much as 24 hours, due to fairly routine weather events.

“It is miraculous that only a couple of deaths have been reported so far. I expect the toll will turn out to be much greater, especially among the elderly and disabled.”

DTE is notorious for taking unreasonable amounts of time to respond to customer complaints, and often blatantly ignores complaints altogether. They have drastically cut back on tree trimming, a necessary maintenance to prevent branches and dead trees from falling on above-ground wires and starting electrical fires. Meanwhile, aging power lines and transformers often fail, plunging thousands into the dark due to a lack of adequate backup systems.

The regular failure of the electrical grid during storms is a symptom of the general breakdown of the

infrastructure, including roads, bridges and water systems. Detroit schools were just forced to close less than two weeks ago in a separate infrastructural breakdown affecting the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, leading to contamination of the city's water supply. Even more students lost school days last week as a result of the power outages.

While DTE Energy routinely and swiftly shuts power off to those behind on their bills, those affected by this power outage will likely receive little to no compensation. The school closures cost many parents unpaid days home from work, in addition to food spoiled and rotting in refrigerators, property damage caused by flooding from exploding frozen pipes, fallen trees on houses and cars, fires caused by downed wires, and other catastrophes. Reports of this nature poured in all weekend.

DTE Energy should take full financial and legal responsibility for all of these losses, in addition to compensating customers for the amount of time spent without power. While residents are being left to fend for themselves, DTE recorded earnings of \$868 million in 2016 and was awarded a four percent rate increase on top of its already exorbitant charges in January by the Michigan Public Service Commission.



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