

# Almost 10,000 Detroit households face water shutoff

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The *Detroit News* reports that some 9,000 households in the city remain “vulnerable to shutoffs” three weeks after an ultimatum by city officials for customers to pay past-due water bills or face service disconnection. According to the *News*, some 400 households had their water service disconnected in the one-week period following the city’s resumption of water shutoffs earlier this spring.

The *News* article is little more than a public relations job for the city, implying that those still at risk for shutoff are ignoring the supposedly ample public assistance and generous payment terms that are available, writing, “As long as you come in and ask for assistance, you won’t get shut off.” However, if they were to put it more honestly, they would say, “If you shell out some cash now, you may make it until next month before we shut you off.”

Some 18,000 shutoff notices were sent out weeks ago and it is reported that 9,915 are still threatened with shutoff, with the rest signing up for the city’s onerous payment plan program. Terms of the payment plan are hardly generous. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) developed the program, called the 10-30-50 plan, in 2016. Under the plan, residents must pay 10 percent of their past-due balance up front to avoid having their water shut off. The rest of their balance is added to their monthly bill over 24 months. Thus, water customers who already confront difficulties in affording their bills will have their plight magnified over the next two years.

It would be more appropriate to call the plan “three strikes and you’re out.” Residents that fail to make their new full monthly water payment can then only avert shutoff by paying 30 percent up front. One more default, and it’s 50 percent. After that, the full back balance must be paid before water service can be

restored.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, the increase in the number of water shutoffs is a systemic problem across the country. Many states have enacted laws that attach water bills to tax liens on houses, often resulting in residential home foreclosure.

Some 8,000 residents in Flint, Michigan, are dealing with just that situation right now, even though their water supply has been poisoned by the criminal actions of the authorities supposedly responsible for maintaining safe drinking water. In Flint, the City Council passed a one-year moratorium on water liens two weeks ago that is threatened with overturn by the mayor’s office and a state-appointed fiscal responsibility board.

In Cleveland, Ohio last year, 8,000 homes were foreclosed due to unpaid water bills.

Detroit has been aggressively shutting off residents with back water bills since 2014, when the city was undergoing its forced bankruptcy. Some 40,000 residents faced shutoff at that time. As a result, one in six homes in Detroit do not have running water.

The motivation of the state-appointed emergency manager and the DWSD was to eliminate “bad debt” and thus make the water system more attractive for possible future privatization.

The *News* article obscures the implication of the denial of water to Detroit residents: the utter failure of the capitalist economic system that cannot provide wide layers of society with the most basic necessity of life.

After citing remarks of DWSD Director Gary Brown, who declared, “We want every single customer to having a path to having water,” the *News* reports that 6,000 Detroit households are enrolled in the Water Residential Assistance Program (WRAP) that was established in 2015 after the Detroit bankruptcy was

finalized and the regional Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) was split off from the DWSD.

The program pays one-third of a customer's water bills and freezes—not eliminates—past-due bills. The *News* boasts that the number of past-due accounts has been reduced from 24,302 last year. But last summer, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that the WRAP had run out of money and residents seeking to apply were turned away.

The WRAP program was set up to provide assistance throughout the southeast Michigan region. The program is largely a public relations effort and its funds are limited, based largely on the GLWA's aggressive cost-cutting that involves replacing skilled public employees with low-wage contractors provided by private corporations like Veolia.

The proposal that the city of Flint sign a long-term contract with the GLWA includes the provision of low-income assistance to Flint residents as well, further depleting the overall funding available to the region.

The *News* then reports that legislation is being drafted in the Detroit City Council that would “prevent shut offs in households with vulnerable populations, including expectant mothers, children under 18, seniors and those with disabilities.” This appears to be another public relations effort, since it has little chance of getting through the city's legal department and its fiscal responsibility board.

The crisis confronting residents of Detroit again illustrates the abject failure of a system based on the subordination of basic necessities, including water, to the drive for profit. This state of affairs will continue as long as the needs of private corporations, speculators and bondholders take precedence over the right of working people to access to safe drinking water.



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