

Experts warn of public health crisis as Detroit rejects halt to water shutoffs

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Doctors, researchers and community groups sponsored a meeting last week at Wayne State University to warn of an impending public health crisis in Detroit due to mass water shutoffs.

Preliminary data from the Henry Ford Global Health Initiative found that residents are 1.55 times more likely to be subject to water-borne illness if they live on a block where a water shutoff occurs. The research compared household-level data from blocks with high rates of water shutoffs in Detroit to hospital visits related to water-borne illnesses at Henry Ford Hospital.

The conference was called by We the People of Detroit, a research group, and the Detroit Equity Action Lab, a program at the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University. Peter Hammer, a professor at the university, introduced the panel of speakers from the public health community who outlined the health risks associated with water shutoffs.

One speaker, Dr. Wendy Johnson, director of La Familia Medical Center in New Mexico, condemned the shutoffs and spoke on the myriad of health problems associated with lack of access to safe water, including poor hygiene, contagious water-borne illnesses, dehydration, poor nutrition from the inability to cook at home, and mental health issues stemming from the physical complications.

Another speaker, Dr. Paul T. von Oeyen, a retired high-risk obstetrician at Beaumont Health Systems in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak, told the meeting, “I am appalled by the lack of empathy on the part of Mayor Duggan and the director of DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department], Gary Brown—that they would institute this policy of water shutoffs on this most vulnerable layer of the population, shutoffs on expectant mothers and their infants.”

Von Oeyen outlined the grave health risks that face pregnant women who lack access to clean running water. “Expectant mothers are especially vulnerable in the hot summer months with maternal overheating when water shutoffs are at their height,” he said. He explained that pregnant women are at a much higher risk of heat stroke,

which could kill the fetus, as well as possible diseases from higher risk of infection due to living in unsanitary conditions. He drew parallels between the water crisis in Flint and the associated spread of Legionnaire’s disease and the lack of access to safe drinking water due to shutoffs in Detroit.

Risks associated with the consumption of contaminated water include neural tube defects in the fetus. Two of the most common neural tube defects are spina bifida, a permanently disabling condition that occurs in the womb when the spinal column does not close all the way; and anencephaly, where a child is born without a large portion of the skull and brain. The life expectancy of the latter defect is anywhere from a few hours to a few days after birth.

“Any reasonable person would expect that the city of Detroit would immediately issue a moratorium on shutoffs,” said a researcher from the team responsible for the findings.

An estimated one in six homes in Detroit do not have running water. Since the beginning of the brutal shutoff policy in 2014 following the transfer of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) as a consequence of the Detroit bankruptcy settlement, over 80,000 households and buildings have lost access to running water due to nonpayment of bills.

“Water is a basic human right, and the UN came to Detroit and said, ‘You guys are violating a basic human right,’ said Johnson. He continued, “Detroit is one of the few cities in the world which has these draconian measures to cut off water for so many people, this essential human right. It is evil. The people who are rich don’t suffer, their debts get forgiven.”

One speaker stated that, “the map of water shutoffs is the map of poverty.”

Other recent studies reveal the crisis-ridden state of US infrastructure, including water. The dilapidated infrastructure and irrational character of privatizing water for profit is leading directly toward disaster.

A study released last week by the Environmental Working

Group stated that over 6 million Michigan residents have been potentially exposed to hexavalent chromium and/or trihalomethanes in their tap water, both of which can cause cancer. While most state water institutions are technically below the regulatory limit, that limit is often raised, in contradiction to public health guidelines. In other words, if the contaminant costs too much to remove from the water, state agencies will manipulate statutory limits at the expense of public health in order to sidestep removing the harmful contaminants.

Three years into the ongoing Flint water crisis, in which residents were poisoned with lead following the switch to polluted Flint River water from the DWSD, no viable solution has been put forward by any section of local, state or federal government.

Residents are now facing foreclosure for refusing to pay—or not being able to pay—for poisoned water. Another study released in January of this year from Michigan State University estimates that one-third of American households will not be able to afford their water bills in the next five years.

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, in conjunction with ex-police chief and now head of DWSD Gary Brown, have refused a moratorium on the water shutoffs and have instead insisted on residents getting on a “payment plan” in which the person at risk of losing service is forced to pay a large sum of the debt up front and then pay the balance on a month-to-month basis. The goal of the payment plan is not to prevent water shutoffs, but to squeeze the maximum revenue from hard-pressed Detroit residents.

Duggan is up for reelection this year and has the full support of the business establishment, including a Detroit *Free Press* endorsement. Meanwhile, Abdul El-Sayed, former director of public health in the city, is running for governor of Michigan. He has remained silent on the findings, along with the current director of public health, Dr. Joneigh S. Khaldun.

A senior researcher at Henry Ford, Marcus Zervos, accused the panel of using the preliminary findings for political gain, while simultaneously admitting that it is “reasonable to conclude that there would be some impact to public health caused by water shutoffs.” Henry Ford Health System has a large stake in Detroit real estate, as it makes plans to expand its operations throughout the city.

In organizing the conference, We the People of Detroit partnered with multiple sections of local Democratic Party-oriented activist and religious groups, including the People’s Water Board, which, according to its website, contains 33 “anti-poverty, social justice, environmental, conservation, faith-based” groups. These include AFSCME Local 207, Moratorium NOW, the Boggs Center Detroit, the Detroit

Greens, and the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.

A list of demands posted on their web site simultaneously demands a moratorium on shutoffs while advocating the “original Detroit Water Affordability Plan,” that is based on the premise that by offering slightly lower water rates for low-income residents the DWSD would actually collect more overall revenue.

They have also promoted the illusion that the United Nations’ toothless commission for social development intervene to reverse the city’s water shutoff policy.

The primary political function of these groups is to conceal the responsibility of the Democratic Party for the social crisis in Detroit, particularly during and following the city’s exit from bankruptcy. Further, these groups promote the poison of racial politics, insisting that the root of the water shutoff crisis in Detroit, as well as the Flint water crisis, is racism, not the bankruptcy and failure of capitalism.

This has been the particular role of Hammer, who issued a paper last year insisting that the water crisis in Flint was the product of “strategic and structural racism.”

These groups, despite their occasional oppositional posturing, serve as an auxiliary prop of the corporate status quo. The claim that Democratic politicians can be pressured into implementing small, completely inadequate policy changes is aimed at preventing workers from drawing the larger conclusions on the nature of the crisis they confront.

The mass water shutoffs in Detroit are a crime of capitalism. Free access to safe clean drinking water for all can only be obtained through the independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the Democrats as well as the Republicans.

The author recommends:

The politics of the Detroit People’s Water Board
[31 July 2014]

Detroit professor advances “structural racism” theory of Flint water crisis
[1 September 2016]



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